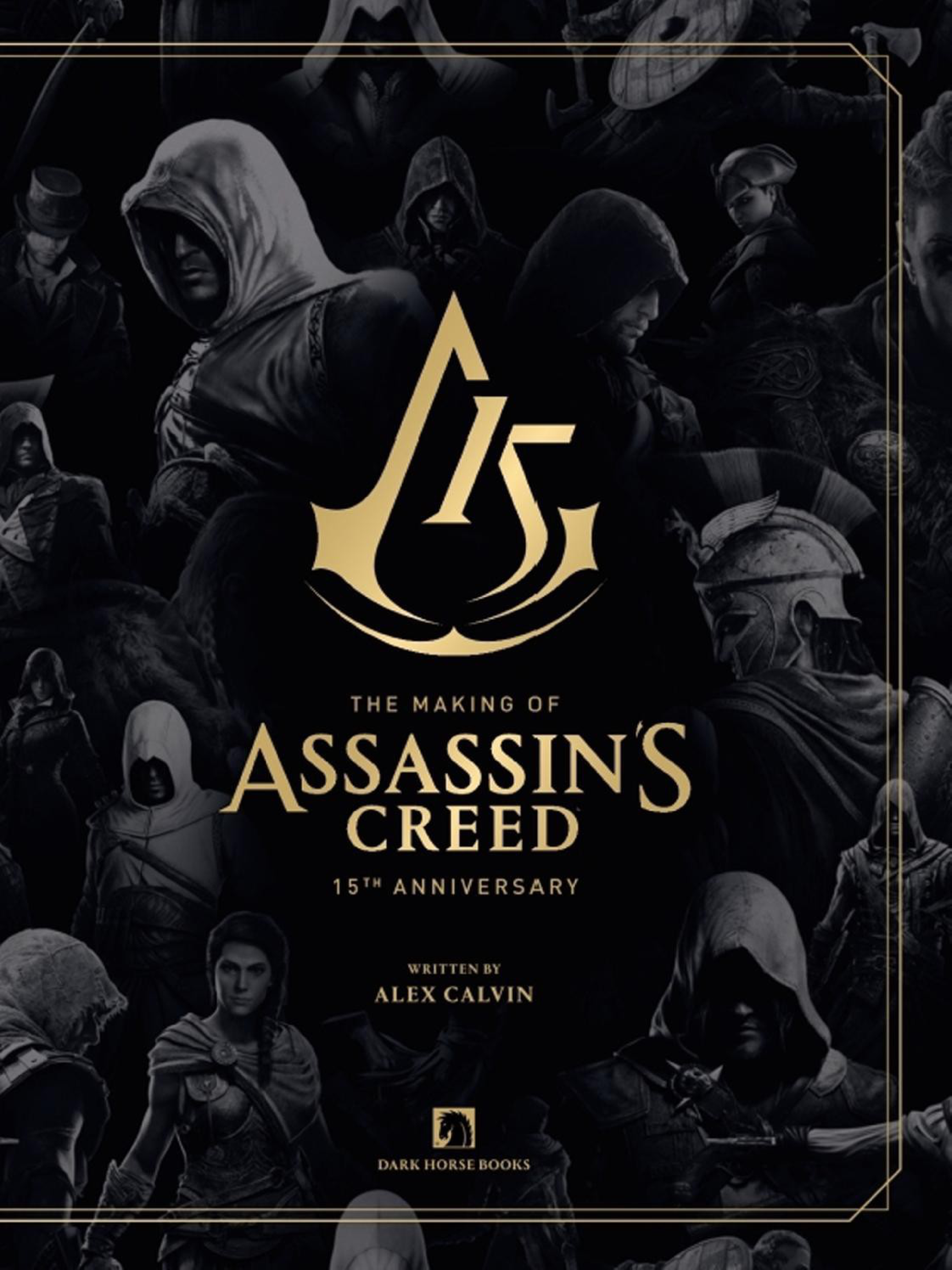
15
THE MAKING OF
ASSASSIN'S CREED®
15TH ANNIVERSARY



THE MAKING OF

ASSASSIN'S CREED

15TH ANNIVERSARY

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THE MAKING OF ASSASSIN'S CREED: 15TH ANNIVERSARY
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DEDICATION

Thank you to all the *Assassin's Creed* players and fans across the world. It is with your support that we have been able to continually raise the bar and challenge ourselves to create rich and innovative experiences year after year. We dedicate this book to you.

FOREWORD

MARC-ALEXIS CÔTÉ

Fifteen years ago, a game revolutionized the open-world genre through the introduction of technological breakthroughs that allowed a freedom of movement and an immersion that had never been seen before, coupled with an edgy narrative metastory that promised a bright future for subsequent games. Fifteen years ago, then, *Assassin's Creed* was born through the craft of an ambitious team that had reinvented the *Prince of Persia* franchise a few years earlier. Driven by their passion and commitment, they were on a mission to redefine the action-adventure game for the next generation of consoles. They were so successful that today we have the honor of carrying that legacy forward, a legacy that takes many forms.

First is embracing the richness of diversity. One of the things I've been most proud of while working on *Assassin's Creed* is how much of a beacon for diversity it has been. We launched *Assassin's Creed* with a hero of Arabic descent, born of a Christian mother and a Muslim father. Our greatest early success came at the hands of Ratonhnhaké:ton, a Native American. The rebirth of *Assassin's Creed* in 2017 with *Origins* featured Bayek, an Egyptian hero. Aveline, Shao Jun, Evie, and Kassandra gradually paved the way for more gender diversity. We research the settings, cultures, and periods of our games in a way that has made working on this franchise an eye-opening journey through the importance of creating inclusiveness in our world for all those who encounter it.

Secondly, we carry with us the desire to constantly innovate and reinvent ourselves. With every game that I've had the chance to work on, I have had the privilege of being surrounded by incredibly brilliant people who wish to push our industry forward. People who are not afraid to try new things and to take risks. People for whom technological and creative limits are only a creation of the mind. Every new period we choose to feature in our games creates an incredible playground where our creators can thrive.

Finally, our legacy is one of transforming history into one of the most eye-opening sources of entertainment around. One of the greatest entertainers of all time, Walt Disney, said, "I would rather entertain and hope that people learned something than educate people and hope they were entertained." By creating virtual worlds that are rich with knowledge and insights about our real world, we can leverage the power and interactivity of video games to open our collective minds to the lessons that the past can give us to create a better future.

As we shaped the course of the franchise over its fifteen years, *Assassin's Creed* also changed us. As this book dives into the history of the franchise, I hope it helps you appreciate all the passion and challenges that go into creating something that is loved by millions of fans throughout the world. As you will see, we all came to *Assassin's Creed* differently, and let me whet your appetite with my own personal story.

To say I was not destined to take over the reins of *Assassin's Creed* is an understatement. My relationship with *Assassin's Creed* started as many momentous events in life do: reluctantly and unexpectedly. On a cold winter day in January 2010, my boss intercepted me in the hallway as I was entering the office, yanked me away from my project, asked me to follow him to his car, and started the three-hour drive from Québec City to Montréal, where I would undertake the exciting mandate of giving life to some of the war machines imagined by Leonardo da Vinci. Twelve months later, I had the honor of accepting a game award in Los Angeles for *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood* on behalf of our entire worldwide team (the awards show was on the same day as the Montréal studio's Christmas party).

My initial reservations morphed into passion with every game I worked on as I discovered the eye-opening nature of history. Working on *Assassin's Creed* is a privilege that I will cherish throughout my life, as it helped me better understand how our past, present, and future are inexorably intertwined.

MARC-ALEXIS CÔTÉ

VP & Executive Producer, *Assassin's Creed*

CHAPTER ONE

EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED

ASSASSIN'S CREED

It's no secret that *Assassin's Creed*'s roots lie within the *Prince of Persia* franchise.

Back in 2001, French publisher Ubisoft acquired the license to Jordan Mechner's classic series of 2D platformers with the aim of bringing them into the 3D realm. The result was 2003's *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, a title that would spawn three sequels and almost immediately reached cult status following its release. Within months of its release, it had sold millions of copies around the world.[1]

It's unsurprising that Ubisoft wanted more from the team that created *The Sands of Time*.

The crew was tasked with making a brand-new *Prince of Persia* game for the upcoming generation of consoles. These new machines—Sony's PlayStation 3 and Microsoft's Xbox 360—were far more powerful than their predecessors. This meant that they could produce not just more impressive graphics, but also those of greater complexity.

When interviewing to be a producer, Jade Raymond was asked by Yannis Mallat, who at the time was an executive producer at Ubisoft Montréal, how she would update the *Prince of Persia* formula.

"My answer had three parts. First, I would enhance and evolve the combat system. Second, I also said that I'd create more of an open-world version, where players would have more autonomy and more freedom to play how they want," she remembers. "I think at the time, *Grand Theft Auto* had recently released, so I said, 'Imagine that openness of *GTA*.' Third, I'd probably gear the brand toward a more mature audience. So those were the three things I suggested, and they coincided with what Yannis was hoping for, so I got the job."

KILLING TIME

It wasn't until Raymond was actually hired as a producer that she was told what she would be working on.

This version of the game, dubbed *Prince of Persia: Assassins*, is somewhere between *The Sands of Time* and what is known today as *Assassin's Creed*. It went

[1] As of 2014, *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* had sold more than fourteen million copies around the world.

"THE MORE WE LOOKED AT IT, THE MORE IT BECAME CLEAR THAT THE WHOLE PRINCE STORY DIDN'T MAKE SENSE ANYMORE."

through a few iterations; one saw the titular Prince becoming an assassin, while another saw the player taking on the role of the Prince's assassin bodyguard. There was even a co-op version of the game running at one point, internal footage of which had been leaked online.

"The Prince had become an assassin and was in the Levant," level design director Philippe Bergeron says. "So, the setting was very *Assassin's Creed*–like, but we didn't know that at the time. Players also had a co-op partner, so it was also like a co-op game. We had sessions of free running and parkouring through the streets and a Middle Eastern market."

While this was a very promising concept, the team felt that it didn't entirely gel with the *Prince of Persia* game they had just finished working on.

"The more we looked at it, the more it became clear that the whole Prince story didn't make sense anymore," Bergeron explains.

This was the start of *Prince of Persia: Assassins* transitioning into something new, but there were a few additional factors that helped Ubisoft make the change.

First, launching a game early in the life cycle of the new consoles meant that releasing a new brand made a lot of sense.

Also, on a personal level, creating a new intellectual property (IP) would be a dream come true for Raymond.

"I spent a lot of time thinking about what the best conditions were for creating a new IP. One thing I noticed was that all the biggest IPs were usually launched when a new console came out, and then the game's sequels would extend that console's life. That was usually the

pattern of success. When people buy a new console, they are buying the dream of playing games that they have never been able to play before, and which weren't possible on previous consoles. It's actually really appealing to create a new brand from scratch, to be able to take advantage of a new console, and to not be tied to what the brand used to be or to the old console's tech. It's really liberating. That was the approach I really wanted to take with the team. I also thought that from a business perspective, it made a lot of sense."

Second, while Ubisoft owned the *Prince of Persia* catalog, it didn't actually own the *Prince of Persia* IP. That still belonged to its original creator, Jordan Mechner.

"Ubisoft Montréal at that time had mostly been making *Tom Clancy* titles," Raymond says.

"They didn't really have their own IP. This was a great opportunity to add value to Ubisoft while also giving the players something worthwhile. If players were going out and spending five hundred dollars on a new console, they would want something that was unique to that console and which wouldn't have been possible before. I really thought the business logic was there. I talked to Yannis about it. I wanted to create a brand that—if possible—could expand and be transmedia. Our big dream at the time was making three games in total and being able to make sequels that weren't mere afterthoughts. We would spend time on the first game really thinking about how the sequels would fit in, and designing the brand to have an opening for those sequels."

Raymond had discussed with Yannis Mallat the possibility of *Prince of Persia: Assassins* becoming its own brand. And all it took was a conversation at the video game trade show Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) back in 2005.

"I had made all these spreadsheets and produced an executive presentation to convince people we should create our own IP," Raymond says. "At E3, Yannis told me to go talk to Laurent Detoc, who ran business for North America, and give him the pitch. Of course, I didn't have all my spreadsheets or my nice PowerPoint. But I just went over, introduced myself, and gave him the pitch about why I thought it should be a new IP. Straightaway, he said, 'Yes, I agree, let's do it.' That was a pretty cool experience."

Work continued on *Assassin's Creed* in earnest with a few core pillars at its center. These were largely the same as those of *Prince of Persia: Assassins*, which aimed to make the most of the power of the upcoming PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. First, this was going to be an open-world game. Second, players would be able to

climb anywhere. Third, there was going to be a focus on crowds within these worlds, which could be used as part of the game's stealth mechanics.

"CPU and GPU [central processing unit and graphics processing unit] were things that were highly limiting in previous consoles," says Sébastien Puel, brand manager on *Assassin's Creed* at the time.[2] "Those limitations just disappeared. That was the first generation of consoles that truly allowed us to re-create worlds as we know them. We could make cities, streets, and crowds as realistic and believable as possible. That would have been totally impossible on the previous-generation consoles."

Creating an open-world title, in contrast to *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*'s more linear structure, brought with it some significant changes in how levels were constructed. Designers weren't creating a specific route for the player to navigate, but rather were tasked with giving the player an entire world to explore.

"It was the first time internally that we made an open-world game," Bergeron says. "There were open-world games on the market at the time, like *Grand Theft Auto III* and *Vice City*. While we had points of reference that we could look to, we didn't know what that meant for Ubisoft. A lot of it was trying to identify what the paradigms for design were."

As a result, the crew had to come up with some design parameters that allowed them to combine their desire to make levels that ideally pushed players toward a given objective, while also allowing users to ultimately do . . . well . . . whatever they wanted.

"The player can come in from any given direction," Bergeron says. "So, we have to make sure that the player's freedom always remained, despite how they played. Ideally, developers don't guide the player, we don't take control away from them and tell them this is an experience they're gonna live. We may suggest an objective or suggest an encounter or situation, but then we must accept that the player is going to do it their own way, and embrace that. But what we were afraid of was lowering the game's quality or not having the ability to properly set the stage with certain mises en scène, like we had done in our previous games.

"We adapted as we went on. We decided that instead of having one singular path, we'll design three or four different paths to any given quest. They weren't paths the player is forced to travel along, either; they're the paths that we imply that the player should go down. If they decide to go down them, that's awesome, but if they don't, we still have to support them. That became one of our rules."

Adding to the complexity of designing open worlds was the fact that, unlike other open-world games at the time—such as the blockbuster *Grand Theft Auto*—*Assassin's Creed*'s setting was truly a three-dimensional space that players could navigate. Players weren't just confined to the ground; Ubisoft's game was heavily focused on verticality, and users could scale buildings to reach their goals.

As a result, the team came up with a system of what it called "opportunities" within the world. In other words, the developers created levels so that the player was given the option to do something different on a regular basis.

In *Prince of Persia* there was only one path for a player to follow, only one climbing path to reach something. This design wouldn't work for *Assassin's Creed*, which was heavily parkour and climbing based. The team had to ensure that they always provided several action paths for players to use to reach objectives. To do this the designers needed to think of the game as a matrix of opportunities.

Bergeron explains, "We started formulating this philosophy where you could look at any given map or any given location through a wider-frame format, which was a network of connectivity. Therefore, it was almost like a lattice or a matrix around a space where at every given ten meters, you needed to make sure that there was an opportunity to progress another ten meters. But then you turn on and off some of these edges, if you will, in the matrix that determines whether the player can go that way or not.

"That became a type of 3D maze, which led to the same objective in the end. But players still had to analyze what that matrix looked like and then determine where the path was. It was a way for us to examine any given map and analyze whether we had enough paths, if we had created enough blockers, and whether this whole space was an interesting navigation puzzle."

This approach to design means that the player is given the illusion of choice while never being blocked off and told they can't go somewhere. They can go down whichever path they want; they won't be stopped. Ultimately, however, they will end up where the developers wanted them to be all along.

"We didn't have dead ends in the way," Bergeron says. "The player doesn't end up in a situation where they can't go anywhere. There's always an option. There's never a segment that ends in a wall. There's always a way to branch off and eventually reach the same endpoint. We didn't end up with just two or three paths that lead to the goal, instead there's an array of paths throughout the whole level."

[2] Puel became producer on *Assassin's Creed II*, before being appointed executive producer on the *Assassin's Creed* franchise until 2014.

Navigating through these worlds was going to be done with an evolution of *Prince of Persia*'s signature acrobatic platforming style, making use of parkour or free running. While this was a cool and smooth way for the player to make their way around these cities, establishing this as a reality was a real technical achievement for the development team.

"This required gameplay programmers and animation animators to work really closely together," Claude Langlais, the technical director, explains.

"At the time, we were still mostly animating by hand—I think we did a bit of motion capture—but we used what's called inverse kinematics tech. This allowed us to place the limbs in a more precise manner, even if we didn't have the precise movement that had been animated. We built a lot of systems to simplify the way to determine how and where to place limbs, whether it was legs or hands. We tried a few different ways of building systems—overlays or tools—on top of animation to make it easier to make these transitions. Because this team was so motivated and caring, they managed to tweak all the different things and to build all the systems below."

The group pushed systems from *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, such as the method by which the game indicated which surfaces players could climb on.

"We had built a very simple tech for *Sands of Time* called the guidance system," Langlais says. "This system flagged edges that the player could climb. We pushed that to a full 3D environment for *Assassin's Creed* so that the player would know what they could climb on."

The rules that governed this on a gameplay level were simple. For example, if something stuck out more than a bit from a wall, then it could be used to scale the surface.

"Whatever stuck out from the geometry, you were able to grab on to," Langlais says. "It wasn't something that was placed by hand by the developers; it was a system following a set of rules. The player learned that if something was sticking out enough—and if it's not too shallow—then they would be able to grab on to it. That was an automated system, but the rules that came out of it became a foundation of our *Assassin's Creed* technical design guidelines. It was our job to make sure that the visuals matched the functional side of things. If you saw something that stuck out, you would be able to grab on to it. If there was something that looked like the player should be able to grab on to it, but they couldn't, we treated that as a bug.

"The environment had to be legible. You had to understand what you could grab on to."

Brand director Florence Baccard adds, "The idea with *Assassin's Creed* was to give players a lot more freedom

than *Prince of Persia*. I remember the team—and everyone at the company—being super excited by the fact that players could climb anywhere on the building. Everything that stood out by more than two inches from the main building was something players could try to hook on to and climb. That was a big breakthrough for the game and it opened up a lot of possibilities. At the time, that wasn't something that had been done before in video games."

Climbing wasn't the only animation masterstroke. Mechanics like the character's feet landing perfectly on a surface took a lot of work. Even today that's something that a lot of games fail to manage.

"One of the points in production when I knew we were onto something was when a programmer showed us the character running on beams," Puel remembers. "We had these perfect inverse kinematics, which provided a perfect contact between the feet of the character and the beams. The character was able to run on the roofs and so on.

"We had some really exceptional animators and programmers who were able to do things that we had never seen before."

Navigating this world was also intended to be as easy as possible. Creative lead Patrice Désilets was set on introducing what he dubbed "full emotional body control," a system he predicted would make piloting characters in video games easier for those who weren't super-experienced gamers.

"He had this idea that someday controls were going to need to be standardized," Raymond explains.

"You'd be able to pick up and play any game and not have to learn the controls, which was a valid and worthwhile objective. He thought the controls should be the same for all games and should be based on a puppeteering logic. Anyone who hadn't played a video game for ages would be able to pick up a controller and instantly understand that—for instance—the head is the top button, the left hand is the left button, the right hand is the right button, and the bottom button relates to the feet. He argued that we should map out the controls based on that kind of logic; that it should be fully intuitive."

US AND THEM

The team worked hard to flesh out the game's universe at a two-day offsite meeting in Montréal. Part of this was figuring out who the series' major players were and what the big mysteries of the world were going to be.

"I spent a lot of time reading tons of books about secret societies, like Illuminati and the Rosicrucians," Raymond says. "Patrice was also interested in that. Having there be a central mystery as a part of the IP was something that was really important to me. We talked about a whole bunch of different things—what could be at the core of the mystery or this type of revisionist history that we wanted to do. Having the Templars as protagonists made sense since the first game was set during the Third Crusade, which was obviously a holy crusade. That could be where our story started out, with them and the Assassins."

This wasn't just going to be a conflict between these two different organizations, either. The dispute between the Templars and Assassins was much more ideological in nature.

"The actual saying of the Assassins in some of the books that we read during our research is 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted,'" Raymond explains. "When we talk about the Assassin's Creed, that's what we mean. When we talked about the setting, about the Assassins versus the Templars, we knew that the creed was at the root of the meaning we were trying to build around. It made sense to put the Templars in opposition to them, and to make the struggle about control."

This also helped the team come up with a rubric by which they could decide settings for future games.

"On the first *Assassin's Creed*, we spent almost the whole first year talking about the brand's architecture or framework," Raymond says. "What we decided was we would pick a pivotal moment in history where we could explain the changes in our revisionist history by saying that they were due to the actions of either the Assassins or Templars. That was the most important thing.

"We considered obvious time periods: where would it make sense for the Assassins to be and what were the pivotal moments? We brainstormed and to this day, there's still a list of potential time periods and locations, almost like a franchise road map."

The notion of control versus free will also played into the story of *Assassin's Creed*, which saw the game's protagonist, Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad, hunting down several

"THE ACTUAL SAYING OF THE ASSASSINS IN SOME OF THE BOOKS THAT WE READ . . . IS 'NOTHING IS TRUE, EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED.'"

artifacts called the Pieces of Eden. These were capable of powerful illusions that could be used as a form of control, and which were the fruit of narrative director Philippe Morin's mind. The existence of such seemingly advanced technology during the Third Crusade was definitely a hook that would keep people coming back for more.

"It's important to have those types of roots and distant mountains established when you're first working on a franchise," Raymond explains. "That way, you can maintain consistency all along. It's not something you figure out later. That's really what has helped *Assassin's Creed* have the longevity that it's enjoyed. We did a lot of the work for the franchise during the first game's development. There was enough material there to continue to evolve what turned out to be many more games beyond our initial plans."

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Assassin's Creed features three cities that the player can explore: Jerusalem, Acre, and Damascus. Not only do each of these places have a distinct feel, but they all feature a number of different districts within them.

"It was almost like planning a city," art director Raphaël Lacoste says. "You had the poor district, which would look

very interesting, perhaps more organic or human. The more official districts would have official religious buildings with big gardens and more organized streets. We were working with a top-down view, looking at the layouts. Rather than making a linear path, it was more about making an entire blueprint of a city and making sure that we kept the player curious about the various areas in the city. The big landmarks could be seen from a distance, but we also needed smaller landmarks, like a fountain, a door, etc. All of this was to make sure that we had ways of guiding the player in the city, while still keeping the player curious about discovering all these different districts. It was a really cool challenge."

As mentioned earlier, creating full 3D worlds for players to explore was a unique challenge, though one that the team relished.

"It was super interesting for the team to bring these different cities to life with various approaches and tones," Lacoste explains. "Creating a 360-degree environment, one that players can explore in every single direction, wasn't just the biggest challenge of my career, but for the artists and level designers as well. We had to give specific attention to details from afar, such as having interesting compositions and city skylines. At the same time, players could climb these buildings and have their noses right up against specific textures. Even for the new consoles, that was one of our biggest challenges. We had one of the most highly detailed open-world games. Our intention for the franchise was to keep this high level of detail for a long time. All while also making an open-world game and granting players the freedom to navigate throughout the environment."

Each city was portrayed as existing during a static time of the day, but they were all given a specific kind of mood, thanks to the colors that the Montréal team used to create them.

"We had very bold colors for all the cities," Lacoste remembers. "Acre was more of a cyan blue and white color with other highlights. Jerusalem was more mystical with these green and gold values, which were very interesting and spiritual. Meanwhile, Damascus had orange, gold, and very warm colors. This was also connected to the music and to the style. Every single city had a very exclusive, specific tone."

Like with all future *Assassin's Creed* games, the team worked hard to accurately re-create the title's time period. Replicating the Third Crusade turned out to be pretty challenging.

"Over time, we doubled down on the historical research," Bergeron says. "Back then, we still wanted to make a really medieval game.

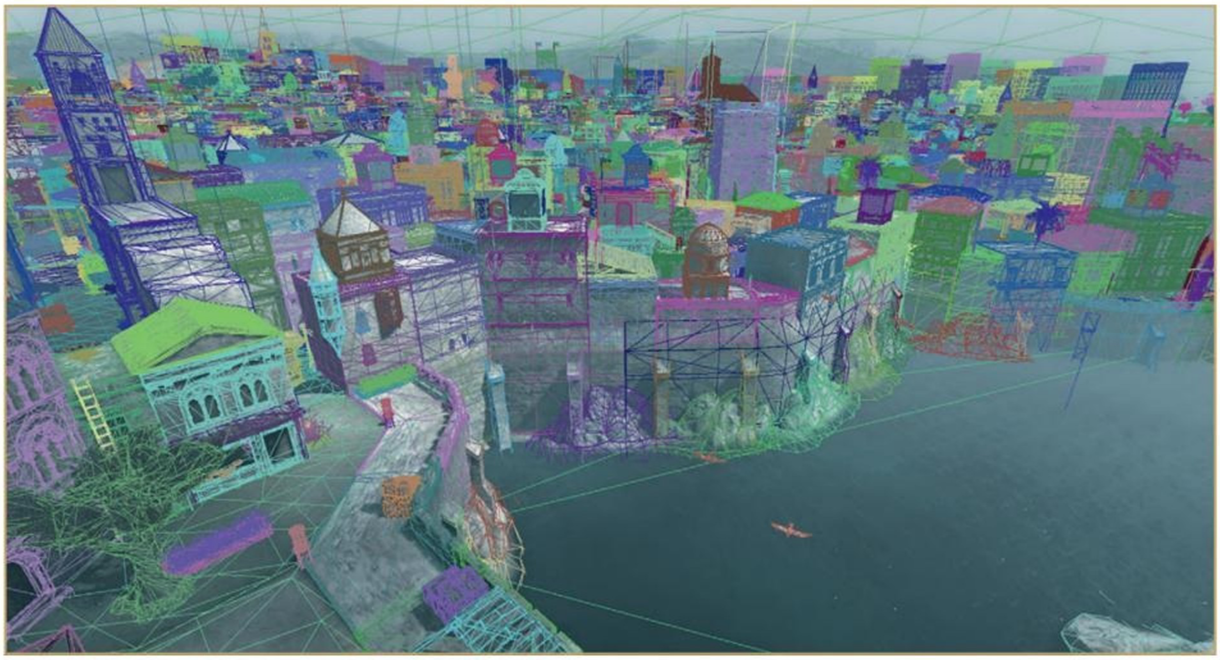
"The Third Crusade was recorded as far as the events go, but in terms of architecture and the people, it wasn't as well known. Obviously, we had a lot of liberty. I remember at one point trying to find city layouts of the time. That involved a lot of going through history and archaeological books. I forget exactly which one we ended up using, but we found this magnificent book—it was huge, like three feet by two feet. It was a giant manuscript that had the full medieval layout of a whole bunch of cities. That's where we got the plans for Acre, for Damascus, and for Jerusalem."

This served as a starting point for the team to show them what these cities looked like from a top-down perspective, allowing the developers to see where important buildings were and so on. From there, Ubisoft tried to figure out which historical figures were alive at the time and—perhaps more importantly—which of them died near the game's historical setting of 1191.

"To choose our targets, we researched who the grand master Templars of that period were within Acre, Jerusalem, and Damascus. We chose the ones who seemed to fit into our timeline. We often didn't know exactly who each person was because there was so little information available. We added character to them and made them into believable video game bad guys."

Re-creating history within *Assassin's Creed* is something that Ubisoft would give increased focus to as time went on. But even at the start, some in the academic community were blown away by what the Montréal studio had accomplished.

"There were concerns about some of the historical elements during the Crusades within the game. Because of this, I contacted Dr. Paul Cobb, who worked at the University of Notre Dame at the time," the senior director of PR for Ubisoft, Michael Beadle, explains. "We reached out to him and he ended up working directly with the development team. He reviewed the entire



game script, as well as art and gameplay footage, to make sure that it was both historically accurate as well as culturally appropriate while keeping sensitivities in mind.

"He was very impressed. He's told us he'd never seen anything this detailed in his lifetime about this era of history. Being able to re-create entire cities in the Middle East during this time period blew him away."

The aim wasn't just to build these huge worlds, complete with re-creations of medieval cities. The *Assassin's Creed* team wanted to fill them, too. This was largely done by the team asking themselves what they would do with all the extra processing power that the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 were said to have. One idea that stuck out was large crowds of people, far greater than anything seen before in the previous generation of consoles.

"We were going to be able to do a lot more with artificial intelligence, including crowds," Raymond says. "We had some really ambitious tech people on the team. We told one of them—James Thérien—that we wanted to have crowds of fifty people. On previous gens, if you had more than thirty AI-created characters, everything broke down. But James was like, 'No, we'll have crowds of two hundred people.'

"It's nice to have tech people who aren't saying no, but instead are really ambitious. We had a really, really determined tech team. We were going to have huge crowds."

Being able to simulate large numbers of NPCs (nonplayable characters) in a world was a great way to make an area feel alive and populated. But it also would come to serve a useful gameplay function: social stealth.

"Patrice had always been a big fan of the *Metal Gear Solid* series," Raymond explains. "The idea of stealth was something that he'd always liked as a gamer, so when we talked about crowds, he wanted to look at how we could reinvent stealth now that we had this new tech available."

Baccard adds, "When I first saw the game, what really stood out was the use of the crowd as a gameplay ingredient, the social stealth. The fact that you could be in a crowd and use it as cover meant you could have a very

intricate interaction between the main character and the crowd. One of the references that was used at the time was of an American football player or rugby player touching people on their shoulders to pass through the throng, and then using his parkour skills to get out of the crowd."

Someone who could use a crowd to be stealthy was high on the list of qualities that the team envisioned for the protagonist of *Assassin's Creed*. The Montréal team was set on the hero being an assassin, too, which fit with someone acrobatic and adept at sneaking.

"The first thing is that this character should be able to hide in a crowd," Sébastien Puel, executive producer of the *Assassin's Creed* brand between 2009 and 2014, explains. "At the same time, you want them to be a real hero. How was this character going to stand out while also being able to believably blend into a crowd? That was one thing that was difficult to imagine. That's why we came up with this concept of the hood that the character wore when they were in a crowd, so they didn't look out of place within the game."

Concept artists did around sixty drawings to show different takes of what their protagonist could look like, with the team eventually landing on a sketch of a man in a white monk cloak with a red sash around his waist. This sketch was drawn by Ubisoft Montréal's current art director, Khai Nguyen.

"They nailed this character pretty late in the production, maybe 2005," Lacoste says. "They had this sense of wanting to keep this white, pure color for the outfit, making a connection with the monk. Here's someone who is answering his call to duty. But he's also a killer, so there's this interesting contrast between the austerity of the design and this almost killing-machine power he can have in the Assassins."

From there, the team had to figure out what kind of face Altaïr would have. This started with character art lead Patrick Gagné coming up with a bunch of different looks for the protagonist, but these didn't quite hit the mark. So, the team decided to speak to some modeling and acting agencies in the Montréal area.

"At this time, games weren't really using likenesses so much," Raymond explains. "So we were given the okay from legal. This was the first time Ubisoft had done this. We got the approval from legal, we did the casting, we had a model walk in, and we were like, 'Okay, that's

the face we want to use.' It was the first game that did a scan based on someone. We actually ended up doing scans of a lot of the other people who showed up to use for crowds and other characters in the game.

"That casting ended up being really useful. It's obviously rather commonplace now, but it was the first time Ubisoft had done that."

The final part of the process of creating the character of Altaïr was figuring out his personality and how he fit into the world of *Assassin's Creed*. This was also done as part of the same two-day offsite meeting that the core team organized to determine the game's universe.

"We spent a full day just on Altaïr," Raymond remembers. "We were asking questions about him, such as how he feels about being an assassin and how he kills. Those really added a lot of the touches.

"I think that made Altaïr unique and original. Patrice said that Altaïr kills lovingly and we thought that was a very original way to think about an assassin. What does it mean to 'kill lovingly'? This inspired us to have those trademark moments after he had killed someone where he would lay the body down. He's doing it with respect.

"We also asked what kind of animal Altaïr would be and landed on the eagle. That's why there's a peak in his hood and why he's always perched up on high buildings and things like that."

Puel adds, "Altaïr was defined as a bird of prey. He's not a mass killer; he's someone who is driven by political conflicts. He is at the top of the building, at the top of the city, looking down at his prey. He's only going after one specific target. We really felt he was a bird of prey. As a result, there are a lot of key poses that we defined so they could look like an eagle."

The name Altaïr, of course, comes from one of the Arabic words for eagle. But it also had another meaning.

"Altaïr is also the name of a star in the Aquila constellation," Puel explains. "That name really showed what the character was. He was an eagle, a bird of prey. He was in the sky on the roofs. He would look at his prey and hit them when he decided."

Though he has many weapons at his disposal, Altaïr is best known for using the hidden blade, a retractable knife that sits on the inside of his wrist—this is the reason why Assassins don't have their ring finger. This weapon was chosen for fairly obvious reasons.

"He had to be able to hide it under his cloak," Raymond says. "Altaïr had to be able to blend into the crowd."

While the vision of *Assassin's Creed* is very much in line with that of the original mandate for a next-generation *Prince of Persia* game—with crowds and parkour—one feature that was originally planned during that project is missing: cooperative gameplay.

Prince of Persia: Assassins at one stage featured a co-op mode, which was dropped due to the huge demand it would have placed on the team, both technically and from a design perspective.

"We were pushing our tech in so many different areas that building *Assassin's Creed* with a multiplayer or co-op setting would have been too much," Langlais remembers. "We had to put that aside to focus on everything else.

"It was a bridge too far technically, but also in terms of design. Doing everything in a co-op setting, whether the players are there or not, added a layer of complexity to the proceedings. We had to focus and properly realize this open world with its dynamic loading, crowds, and parkour. Just that on its own was enough."

Initially, Désilets wanted *Assassin's Creed* to have no UI (user interface) or menus. That meant no maps or any kind of assistance. Instead, players would have to figure out how to find and complete an objective just like the character was going to have to. Eventually, this was dropped because playtesting showed that it made *Assassin's Creed* too difficult for a lot of people.

As a result, the team introduced UI elements and a map into the game. But the map wasn't going to be visible in its entirety from the start.

"We had already built these cities with lots of amazing high buildings and loads of verticality," Raymond remembers. "Patrice said, 'Ah, the Assassin will climb up to the top of these high buildings like an eagle, and that's how players are going to defog the map.' We were going to put maps in the game, but there was still an element of exploration."

Reaching high points allowed Altaïr to sync up with the world and unlock various areas of the cities he was exploring. This kind of mechanic has become rather common in the open-world genre—in games from both Ubisoft and other companies. But what sets this

mechanic apart in *Assassin's Creed* is what comes next: the leap of faith.

After unlocking a new part of the world, the character leaps from the top of this high point all the way back down to street level. This was inspired by the tales of explorer Marco Polo.

"There's a book that both Patrice and I had read called *The Adventures of Marco Polo*, where he comes across the original Assassins," Raymond says.

"He describes how amazing they are and how they will do anything their master says. Their master gives a display to Marco Polo where he lines a bunch of them up and orders them to jump to their deaths, and they just do it. Polo sees that this is a whole other level of soldier.

"So, Patrice said that in this version of the story, the Assassins aren't really leaping to their deaths. It was all a mind game and it ties into the whole 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted.' It was just a display for Marco Polo and they were actually jumping down to someplace safe, but it looked like they were willing to jump to their deaths."

In fact, there is a scene in the original *Assassin's Creed* that circles back to this at Masyaf. A group of Assassins all jump down on the orders of their leader, Al Mualim, in order to intimidate the Templars. But the team wanted to do more with the idea of the leap of faith.

"We already had that concept in mind and it was something we wanted to talk about," Raymond says. "So we said, why don't we bring that leap-of-faith concept into how you get down from these high points that you've climbed up? We had some bales of hay that he would fall into. We had a good laugh about that, it was ridiculous. It was funny, but still somewhat effective."

Including more UI elements in *Assassin's Creed* also resulted in Eagle Vision. This is an ability that allows certain individuals to locate hidden passageways, to distinguish illusion from truth, and to locate and track targets through a color-coded view of the world.

"Eagle Vision was something that came a little later," Raymond says. "It wasn't initially planned. However, when we needed to put in more UI to help the player, Patrice came up with the concept."

> "THE ASSASSINS AREN'T REALLY LEAPING TO THEIR DEATHS. IT WAS ALL A MIND GAME AND IT TIES INTO THE WHOLE 'NOTHING IS TRUE, EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED.'"

THE CUTTING EDGE

In addition to making a new property for Ubisoft, the team at Montréal was also creating a brand-new game engine. The studio had previously used the Jade engine to create both *Beyond Good and Evil*—the tech was even named after that title's protagonist—and *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. But this engine wasn't going to be able to hack it with the new consoles, which represented a colossal increase in computational power. The new consoles needed a game engine that could handle this higher amount of power.

Ubisoft Montréal had started to build the Scimitar[1] engine alongside the next-generation *Prince of Persia* game that would become *Assassin's Creed* back in 2004.

"At that point, the Jade engine had run its course," Bergeron explains.

"The way it was structured was mainly intended for 'corridor' games; you couldn't do an open-world game with the Jade engine. We knew from the outset that we needed to make an open world. We also wanted to have crowds as a gameplay element, which meant having a lot of NPCs onscreen. Both of those things led to us making our own engine."

Creating a game engine is an intensely complicated process, even for those who had the experience of doing so. No one on the *Assassin's Creed* team had made this kind of tech before, which meant that it took a long time to build.

"It was a real challenge," Langlais says. "Building a game itself is hard work, but building a game while the engine itself is evolving over time is a monumental task."

Though building a new engine was a huge ask for the crew, it was also entirely necessary. Simply put, *Assassin's Creed* couldn't have been built on any of the existing engines of the time.

"None of the tech that we had at the time could do what we were trying to do with *Assassin's Creed*," Langlais insists. "Growing that tech, evolving the engine to be able to achieve the vision was the only way for us to build *Assassin's Creed*. We managed to do it in a way that could serve this new game but also be reused for other Ubisoft games afterward."

For the first two years of *Assassin's Creed*'s development, the team making it did not have access to the tech

[1] Scimitar was renamed Anvil in 2009.

that would power the game. Only in 2006 could developers actually use Scimitar to make content for the title. Until that point, they had to find other means to work on *Assassin's Creed*.

"As designers, we were doing prototypes on the Jade engine," Bergeron says. "I did some prototypes in Unreal. A lot of the designing was done on paper."

Raymond adds, "Within a few years, we had created a brand-new engine and a brand-new IP. The concepts we had were great, but we were pretty stressed because the engine wasn't ready yet. I remember a moment where we had something like twenty-one level designers—which was a lot for the time—who had no tools to use. They were sitting there and panicking. Half the group was still prototyping in the old engine and people were coming to see me and saying that they wanted to get their work done, but they didn't have any of the necessary tools. It was super frustrating. All of us really wanted to make this game. There was this list of features to build, and it was just a lot. Everything was very ambitious."

When the engine was ready, the team was ready to jump into action. They had several years' worth of ideas and prototypes to be implemented. Thankfully, Scimitar allowed the developers to do a lot of things they couldn't have done before.

"It allowed us to have way more people working on the same maps at the same time," Bergeron says. "From a level designer perspective, in Jade or Unreal at the time, only one designer could work on a map at a given time. With Scimitar, every single item in a world was decomposed into individual files, so multiple people could be working in the same space at the same time without having to check in or check out. It made collaboration so much easier. That was one of the engine's biggest strengths at that point, I think."

While the next-generation consoles were the focus of *Assassin's Creed*'s development, the Ubisoft Montréal crew did explore bringing the experience—in a limited form—to the PlayStation 2. But due to the huge technical differences between the upcoming machines and Sony's older hardware, this was simply not possible.

"We tried to deliver part of the promise of *Assassin's Creed* on the PlayStation 2," Puel remembers. "But we gave up after a few months; the dream of having an entire city filled with crowds just couldn't exist on the PS2. The team said it was impossible to deliver even part of the promise on the PS2. So we ended up dropping that from the project."

STRIKING FROM THE SHADOWS

With development now going at full speed, Ubisoft had to think about how to reveal and market *Assassin's Creed*. The title was first teased at Tokyo Game Show 2005 under the name *Project Assassins* before an updated version of this promo video was released with the name *Assassin's Creed*.

The project had actually been shown off publicly before this at the Game Developers Conference (GDC). The team had done a presentation discussing their work on inverse kinematics and cameras in action-adventure games.

"They had this video talking about all this—with an ambiguous character running around the world—for the GDC audience," Beadle remembers. "This was being shown live before we had actually announced it. At the time, I was in cover-story talks to reveal the game, which ended up being with *Game Informer*. I had to let them know what was being shared at GDC and that it was nothing explicitly tied to any of our projects in development, we just wanted to show off some things our studios had been working on to the industry."

Thankfully, no one connected the dots, not least because no one really knew what was being shown. It helped that at the time, social media wasn't as prevalent as it is today.

But the game's proper full reveal came in a trailer made for E3 2006. This guaranteed that everyone was talking about *Assassin's Creed*. Whereas previous videos had been cryptic, showing only snippets of gameplay, this pre-rendered trailer laid bare the vision of what *Assassin's Creed* would be.

The video starts with Altaïr up on a bell tower, scouting out his target. In a split second, he disappears only to be found walking through the crowd, before striking and eliminating his target. From there, he makes his escape, taking to the rooftops chased by knights only to be cornered against a large wooden door. It looks like game over for our hero, until a group of monks emerges from the doors, allowing him to escape unseen.

Not only was this trailer an impressive way to show off the game to the public; it also allowed the team at Ubisoft Montréal to coalesce their vision for *Assassin's Creed*. By this point, work on the title had been going on for years. The developers were not short on ideas, but they needed to pare down the project to its key mechanics.

"I do think that trailer helped us a lot," Raymond admits. "We had all of these ideas on paper; some of them were in prototypes, some of them were in concept art. But that trailer really tied together the vision clearly and made it something high def, in a way that everyone understood even more. It was really important for the team because it showed how all this came together."

Langlais adds, "The first E3 was really where we started seeing the vision. There was a lot of hype. But—in the end—we actually managed to build something that was really close to the vision that we had at the very beginning."

Eagle-eyed viewers of that trailer will notice a crossbow on the back of our hero, Altaïr. This was, in fact, something that players were meant to have in their arsenal in the first *Assassin's Creed*, but this was cut, as the development staff couldn't figure out how to implement it without making the game too easy.

Alongside the CGI (computer-generated imagery) trailer at E3 2006, Ubisoft was showing off *Assassin's Creed* behind closed doors. After years of working behind the scenes, it was unsurprisingly gratifying for the team to show off the fruits of their labor.

"It was a really stable build," Langlais says. "We spent a lot of long, late nights making that in the buildup to E3. We had played the demo lots of times, we knew it back to front. We were just proud to show the results of almost three years spent working on it. That was really interesting. It was a very different kind of work than building a game engine, but it was super rewarding to receive feedback."

GAME INFORMER COVER

A*ssassin's Creed* was first revealed on the cover of *Game Informer* magazine in June 2006. The ambitious vision for this inaugural game was delivered across ten of the magazine's pages, featuring first-look screenshots, concept art, quotes from the development team, and impressions by *Game Informer*'s staff. In the months leading up to this story's publication, two of *Assassin's Creed*'s creators, Patrice Désilets and Jade Raymond, traveled to *Game Informer*'s Minneapolis, Minnesota, headquarters to pitch the concept of the game for cover consideration. They spent three hours discussing its many inspiration points and even talked about how it could become a franchise that consisted of many chapters.

MODERN VALUES

Once it had been decided that *Prince of Persia: Assassins* would become its own brand, Raymond wanted to ensure that this wasn't just a one-off title, but that it was going to be a franchise.

"There really had to be a strategy or a story device that future teams could use to expand the brand without the brand going all over the place. You need that consistency," Raymond explains.

"The other thing that we were talking about a lot was that our first game took place in the Third Crusade, which is interesting and very original in terms of a setup for the game. There weren't many games taking place in that part of the world or during that historic moment.

"But there were definitely concerns of whether we could make more than one game in that time period. How appealing was that going to be to the mass market? How much are people in general going to be excited about the Third Crusade as a setting?

"I'd ask Patrice to think about how we could extend the brand. How could we give new teams sandboxes to play in? Not only future game teams, but also book or comics authors and other transmedia projects. How do we make the Third Crusade more relevant?"

The group started to brainstorm different ideas of how they could create the world of *Assassin's Creed* while giving future developers the freedom to jump into different time periods. And in a way, they were somewhat inspired by *The Sands of Time*.

"If you think about *The Sands of Time*, there was a narrative framework there for death," Raymond says. "The Prince is narrating the story. If the player dies, he will say something like, 'Oh no, that's not how it happened.' The first thing Patrice proposed was similar. It would have been someone who has amnesia and is struggling to remember what happened. We thought it was interesting, and it definitely gave some flexibility, but we'd still be tied to that one person's lifespan."

From there, the suggestions became even more outlandish. Ultimately, the recommendations did edge closer to the solution that was eventually landed on for *Assassin's Creed*.

"The team kept on saying time travel," Raymond remembers. "I said no because time travel is cheesy. I felt that we needed to ground it. We're making a realistic

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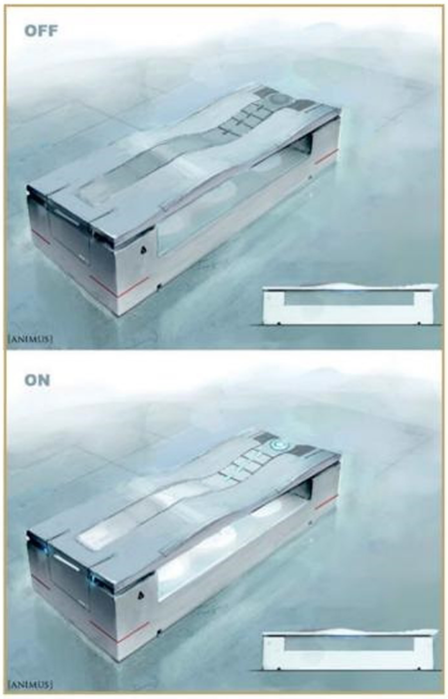


game. It's a historical game. We wanted to make it mature. We needed to come up with our own original thing. So, I did some research on the internet and I found this fringe science paper about genetic memory, which I sent to Corey [May, the lead writer for *Assassin's Creed*]. He thought it was awesome."

May and Désilets discussed this even further. The duo came up with the Animus, a machine that could read people's genetic memories to allow them to relive the lives of their long-dead ancestors.

"The Animus was there to create this connection with the twenty-first century's players," explains Jean Guesdon, the production coordinator on the first *Assassin's Creed* game. Guesdon went on to become the creative director for several of the franchise's games. "Players would have a link with the global universe of the franchise. That's why there is the present-day layer to *Assassin's Creed*.

"The Animus was about making sure we had room for future games, and to ensure that we weren't cornered into a specific time period."

Going into the Animus in-game was Desmond, a bartender who is kidnapped by Abstergo Industries and forced to relive the memories of Altaïr, his ancestor. Though Desmond was a key part of the narrative, the decision was made to not develop him very much in the first *Assassin's Creed*.

"He's meant to be a blank slate," Raymond says. "Therefore, we didn't spend a lot of time on him. He's supposed to be you, the player, right? He was supposed to be there to be your passageway into connecting with the past."

The character's name was chosen after two of Raymond's best friends named their son Desmond. But that didn't stop some interesting speculation in the media about how this decision was made.

"It was funny; we were doing interviews and people were asking if we had called him Desmond because it's like Désilets and Raymond stuck together to make Desmond," Raymond laughs. "We hadn't even realized it, but we thought that was hilarious. I just thought that it was a super-cool name."

While this did allow *Assassin's Creed* to become a franchise rather than a single game, some people on Ubisoft's marketing team weren't sure about the modern-day framing of the title.

"I remember going to a focus test in California where we pitched *Assassin's Creed*. We told the participants that they'd be playing as an assassin in the Third Crusade in Acre, Jerusalem, and so on. We spent probably an hour, an hour and a half, explaining and then showing them bits of gameplay imagery. And then we said, 'By the way, you're actually playing through the genetic memory

of someone in current times.' What we heard from the participants was that it was hard to understand."

As a result, when it came to marketing the game, the focus was put squarely on the historical elements of *Assassin's Creed*, but there were some subtle hints that there was more to this Third Crusade romp than met the eye.

"It was an early Middle Ages game, of which there were many at the time," Baccard explains. "But *Assassin's Creed* was totally different. The tech was very different and the imagery needed to be super slick; we wanted it to feel very modern, so we didn't go at all into the tropes of a medieval game.

"Just by looking at the game cover, you can't really see anything about the environment; it's just a crowd of blue-and-white people. When it came to the typeface we used for the logo, we could have gone totally medieval with stone textures, but we wanted to stay away from that. Everyone on the development team wanted to have something truly modern. All the sci-fi elements in the lore of the brand were really important for them. It wasn't just a historical re-creation; everything was lived through the Animus, and there was modernity in that. So that was also a bit different from what was out there at the time."

"THE ANIMUS WAS THERE TO CREATE THIS CONNECTION WITH THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY'S PLAYERS."

The trailers also alluded to the game having some sci-fi features. As well as having Altaïr causing chaos in the Third Crusade, there were some subtle indications that the medieval setting wasn't all that it seemed.

"At the very end of the E3 demo, you had glitches, as well as the audio of Lucy [voiced by Kristen Bell] talking to you," Baccard explains. "Everybody knew that it wasn't just a game set in the Crusade; they knew that there was something more to it. But we didn't want to say too much. In the end, we wanted to keep it as a surprise. People were also intrigued by the way the marketing campaign played out."

For a long time, too, the project was simply known as *Assassins*. This was the name that the development team originally wanted to go with, but marketing felt that the game needed a little extra something to make it sound unique.

"They kicked off a whole bunch of research about what the name could be," Raymond remembers. "I don't know who they worked with, but they came up with this long list, which included 'Assassin's Creed.' I think the inspiration for that came from the saying 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted,' which we called the Assassin's Creed. In the end, that was the one we ended up picking."

THE FIRST CIVILIZATION

Since the very beginning of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, the notion of a highly advanced civilization that preceded our own was a core part of the series. In fact, this group that produced fantastical artifacts, such as the Apple of Eden, was a central element of the overarching mystery.

Though they are in some ways fundamental to the franchise, the team initially didn't have an idea as to what this civilization would ultimately be.

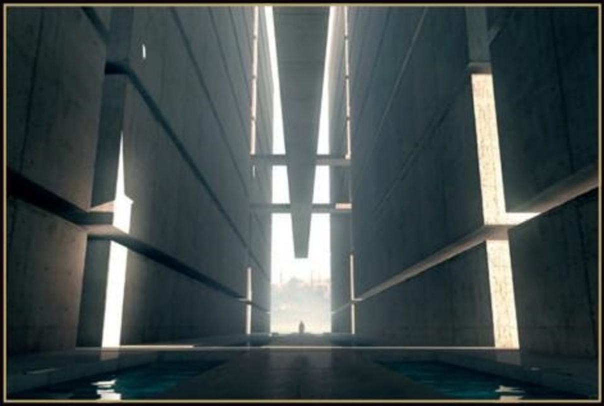
"At first, our plan was that we would end with a third game and that would be when the Mayan calendar predicted that the end of the world was coming," Raymond explains. "At that point, we had an idea that the game would also be tied to the Mayans somehow. But beyond that, we didn't know what it was going to be."

Of course, the *Assassin's Creed* franchise continued beyond the original plans to become a regular series. As the series unfolded, the idea of this prior civilization grew. Whereas before they likely would have retained a degree of mystery, as the franchise progressed, more and more was discovered about them. They were known by many names, including Those Who Came Before, the Precursors, and the First Civilization. The Templars classify them as *Homo sapiens divinus*.

To a certain degree, the teams behind every single game used this enigmatic group in different ways, largely to help tell the story they wanted to tell. But eventually narrative director Darby McDevitt decided to unify the lore to make it more consistent.

"In *Revelations*, we invented these things called memory seals that relive the memories of Altaïr," he laughs. "We invented that strictly for the purpose of doing what we wanted, telling the story we wanted to tell.

"After *Revelations*, I started thinking and talking with other writers about how we should define the First Civ. If everyone's just going to use them in their own weird way, we're going to end up with a very disjointed history. Ten years from now, people will have no idea who they are. Around the end of *Black Flag* and moving into



Origins, I started working with other writers on a big bible about what their history was."

By the time the series reached *Assassin's Creed III* and *Black Flag*, a lot of the mystery surrounding the First Civilization had disappeared. This was the time to go all in and define them as a culture and give them a history. With *Origins*, this group became the Isu.

"'Isu' comes from an Egyptian word that means 'ancient one,'" McDevitt explains.

"That made sense to me. That word stuck around and it made sense that the Egyptians would use a variant of it."

Over time, the team has expanded upon the lore of the Isu, in particular in the most recent trilogy of games. Though McDevitt's efforts to unify the Isu mythology were hampered by him leaving *Origins*, he returned for *Valhalla*. There he once again tried to bring all these different strands together. Over the course of these games, the idea that there were separate groups of Isu emerged. In the *Assassin's Creed* universe, these groups of Isu were what inspired the pantheons of gods that humans worshiped around the world.

"*Valhalla* actually helped to clarify some things, like that there were different pantheons of these gods," McDevitt explains. "If they were a global culture, it makes sense that there would have been Isu all over the world, not just in the Mediterranean. So, it also makes sense that more than just stories about these three Isu—Jupiter, Minerva, and Tinia—had been carried forward to the present day."

FIRST CIVILIZATION ARTIFACTS

From the start, artifacts like the Apple of Eden—relics from the Isu—appeared in the franchise. Though the lore and backstory for the First Civilization weren't thought about a great deal at the start of the *Assassin's Creed* series, the team still had design principles when it came to creating this group's artifacts.

"I remember Patrice talking a lot about Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law," Guesdon explains. "That's the idea that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. So, the Apple of Eden and all of these relics were meant to be actual things. We always said this is technology, not magic. The equivalent is someone in the future finding one of our cell phones. They will look at that the same way we look at First Civ tech. It all had a use. The Apple of Eden was to control the mind, the Staff was about power, the Shroud was for healing, we had crystal skulls that were used for communication."

As a result of the sheer power that these relics represent, Guesdon admits it has been tempting to have the player use them more within the games.

"These elements are on the verge of being magic or a kind of superpower, so it's tempting for the teams to try to use them to create fresh gameplay," he says. "In *Brotherhood*, Ezio uses the Apple of Eden to fight a load of soldiers and freeze their minds. That's always a temptation that we have to fight against. However, when you have several teams working in parallel trying to differentiate themselves from other games in development, having this tech is a kind of curse. A lot of people want to create something that's good for gameplay, so they simply create a First Civ ingredient."

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GROWING AMBITION

When the game was shown off at E3 2006, it had only been in full production for a relatively short period of time. Only within the previous twelve months had the team started to grow in size and finally been able to use the Scimitar engine.

The initial group of less than twenty people prototyping and trying to flesh out this new IP had begun as the cool neighbors on the production floor next to the developers trying to finish *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones*.

"We knew they still had a way to go, but you could tell that something was happening next door," Baccard, who was still part of the *Prince of Persia* marketing team at that point, remembers. "They seemed to be having a lot of fun. You could hear them clapping when they had found a good idea or something. There was a lot of energy coming from that team at the time."

As work ramped up, the crew grew to around 150 people. That's not an especially large number of developers by today's standards, but at the time it was absolutely huge.

"I remember meeting Jade to discuss *Assassin's Creed*," Beadle says. "She was so excited; her eyes just lit up. I looked around the workspace and asked out of curiosity how big of a team she was working with. She told me it was the entire floor. That blew my mind. It was also super secret; they had a bit more security. At that point, I was thinking that this game was going to be a huge deal."

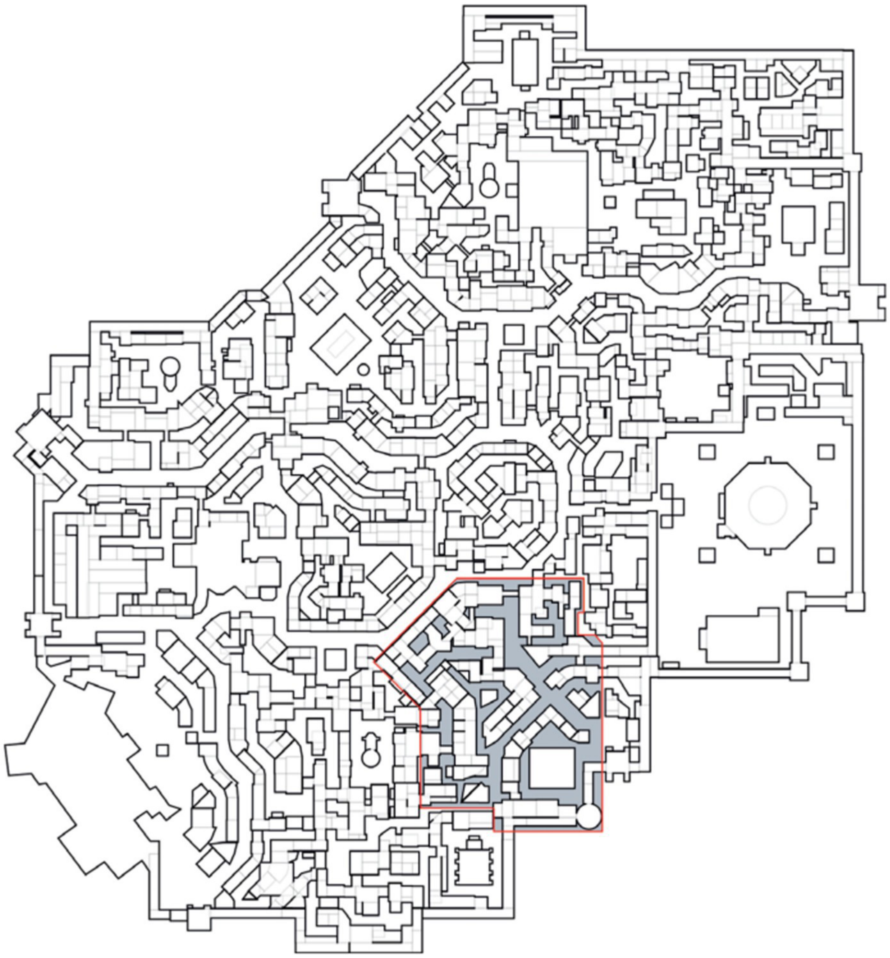
This was a feeling both inside and out. Through trying to fit all the ambition and the myriad concepts that the crew wanted to include in *Assassin's Creed* into the project, there was definitely a sense that this game was going to be the next big thing.

"When I joined the project, I really had this feeling that the team was building something that was clearly bigger than itself," says Guesdon, who joined the project in the fall of 2006.

"There was this feeling that we were making this beast that was just waiting in the shadows to be revealed to the world.

"I didn't know exactly what it would be, but there was this traction, this hype. Like I said, there was this sense of power. We were really making something special.

"We had absolutely no idea what it would become. But we, as a team, were all in the same boat with this feeling of creating something singular."



"THERE WAS THIS FEELING THAT WE WERE MAKING THIS BEAST THAT WAS JUST WAITING IN THE SHADOWS TO BE REVEALED TO THE WORLD."

At times, it seemed as though the team's ambitions were too big. That they might have bitten off more than they could chew. During development, studios tend to have milestones: moments when they have to show their publisher how they are progressing.

That's all well and good when you are working with established tech and have everything you need to get the job done, but that wasn't the case with *Assassin's Creed*. The Montréal team was very much racing along on a train while still laying the track. For one milestone, the artificial intelligence (AI) was barely working, so the level designers weren't able to build anything because the tools they needed were unavailable.

It was all very stressful stuff, but that didn't stop the team from having a good time.

"We would always plan these end-of-milestone celebrations," Raymond explains.

"We planned one even knowing this particular milestone was complete crap and that we hadn't hit any of the stuff that we needed to. So, Claude Langlais and I went out and we bought a ton of really smelly cheese and wine. After our team meeting where we looked at the results, we all had a huge laugh about the state of the game.

"We were working really hard but we enjoyed a good laugh about where things were and we had this little party at the end. One of my favorite memories was Jean-François Duff working on the coding for the crowd AI. He should have been the most frustrated out of all of us because getting a crowd to behave naturally is such a hard problem to solve. At one point he decided to imitate

the AI: he was running around and walking into a wall only to fall down. We all just cracked up.

"To this day, I think there was something really magical not just about what we were able to accomplish, but also the experience of working together. It's the fact that even when things were not great, we went to get smelly cheese, and we laughed about it and stayed together as a team. That's really the best part of the experience."

As is often the case with game development, removing parts of a release was as much a part of the process as was implementing features. The *Assassin's Creed* team had spent years prototyping and dreaming of what they would do once they finally had the necessary tools. However, the realities of deadlines and release dates often meant that a group was unable to do everything on their wish list.

"For example, we had to reduce the number of districts," Guesdon says.

"The original ambition was to have nine districts per city. In the end, we ended up with three. That didn't mean that the cities were reduced in terms of size, it just meant that the variety of the districts was reduced so we could produce the game.

"There were also plans to have more activities for the player to do within the kingdom, the area between the big cities, but when you play the game, it's actually quite empty. There are some guards and some villages that you can cross through, but there's not much to actually do. This was the type of scope reduction we made."

The variety of its city settings wasn't the only aspect of *Assassin's Creed* to see a reduction. The game shipped with nine missions for players to complete, but this figure was initially set to be far, far greater.

"It was a little bittersweet before launch," Bergeron remembers. "We wanted to make a good game. We knew in our hearts what this game could have been. You reach the end of any production and you know what it could have been, but you have to make compromises for it to come out.

"On the level design side, we had planned something like seventy-two missions or quests. But in the end, we only shipped nine. You know that you could have done more, you know what you cut in between, but, of course, the player doesn't know that. That's why I say it's bittersweet—people were very happy with the end product, but we knew we could have done something a bit better and that the game could have been bigger."

As launch approached, the team was more than aware of *Assassin's Creed*'s shortcomings, and worked to try to add in some extra activities to flesh out the experience.

"It was very stressful," Raymond says. "We were working really hard and trying to close down the game. It was super ambitious. It was Ubisoft's first open-world game, the first project on this engine, and we had to cut things to get it done. We knew that there were issues with repetition and that we hadn't had the time to make enough different activities, especially in the investigation. At the last minute we were adding new types of investigations, as well as adding feathers and flags so that there was more to do in the world. Admittedly, these were not our best work, but we knew we had these issues and we had to finish up the game. We were trying to get out the best version we could."

Still, Raymond and company are proud of their work on the first *Assassin's Creed*. It might not have been the full vision that they had intended for release, but the team still achieved a great deal in a relatively short amount of time.

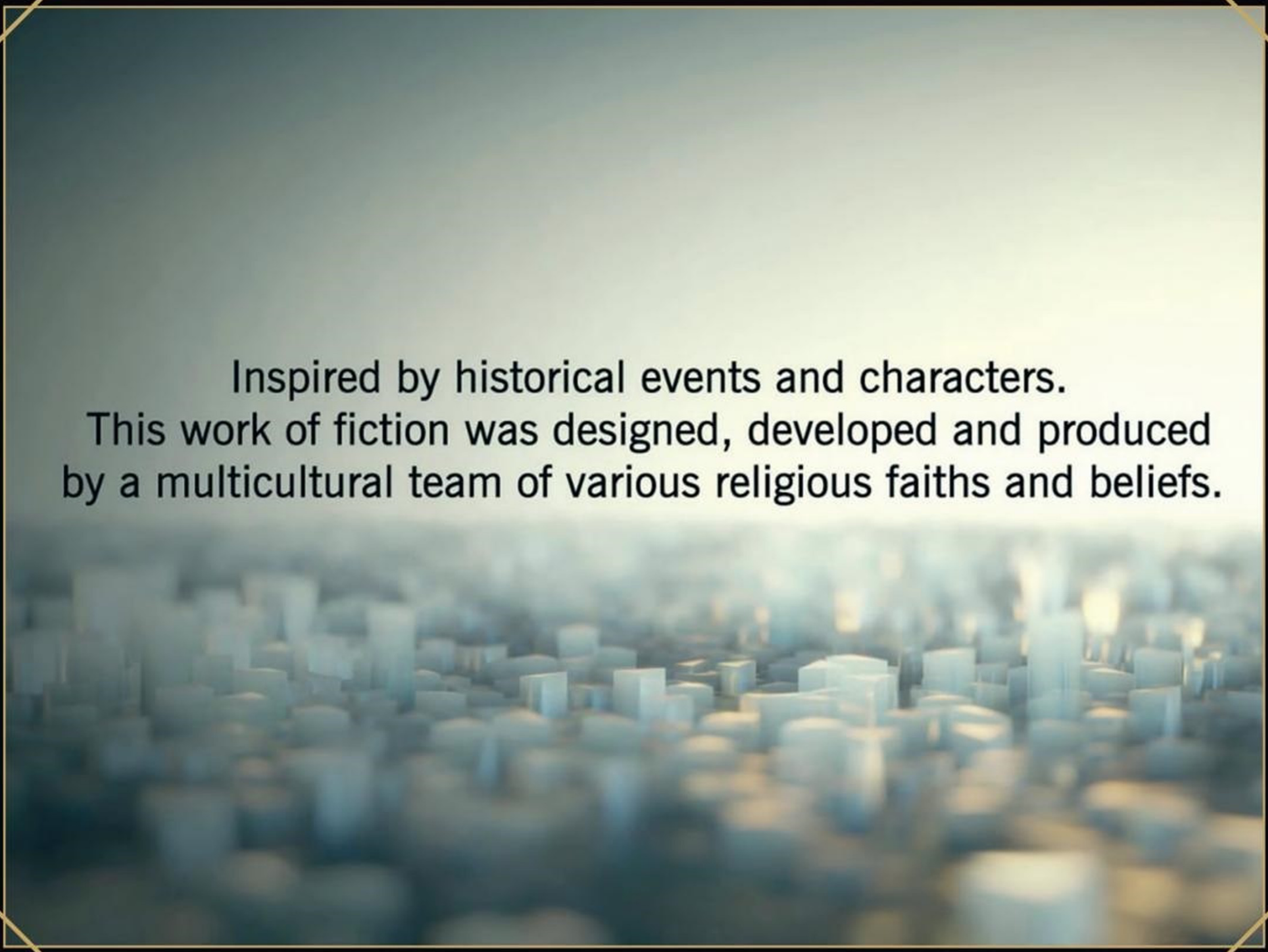
"We did some pretty amazing things," Raymond says. "Within four years we created an entirely new franchise from scratch. We built a brand-new engine for Ubisoft. It was the first open-world engine.

"A lot of people think it would be tons of fun to work on a new IP, but they underestimate how much work it requires. People don't understand that, for example, when you are making a *Batman* game, you know what Batman looks like, you know what car he drives, what tools he has at his disposal, and so on. In a new IP you have to ask who the main character is, how they pose, what type of clothes they wear, and why they are doing what they are doing. How do they feel about it? What's the style of the IP? Will it have a crossbow or not?

"Those are all things that need to be thought of; they need to be consistent and need to be prototyped because not every idea is going to work. There's a lot more trial and error, and much more risk, in a new IP."

Reviews for *Assassin's Creed* were generally positive, though critics pointed out the repetitive elements. Regardless, between its initial 2007 launch and April 2009, *Assassin's Creed* shipped eight million copies. After release Ubisoft said that the game had "greatly outstripped" expectations.

And while content might not have been entirely where the team had hoped it would be by launch, the fundamentals and foundations were there, ready for other teams to build upon in the future. This was a blockbuster brand that would not only go far beyond the original three games that the Montréal crew had dreamed of; it was going to change Ubisoft forever.



ASSASSIN'S CREED: A WARM WELCOME

One of the first things you see when you load up *Assassin's Creed* is a message from the developer. This tells you that the game was created by people with a variety of beliefs and backgrounds from around the world.

When he first booted up *Assassin's Creed*, Michael Beadle was surprised to see this message—he himself had written it, but he was unaware that it had been included in the game.

"During the PR campaign for *Assassin's Creed*, I received an email from a journalist who was questioning some of the historical elements and perspectives of the game. I shared that with Jade on the dev team and asked what her thoughts on it were.

"She had a very strong response and said that it wasn't true. In reply I drafted a message highlighting that the game was made by people with a variety of beliefs and views, and sent it to the journalist. In the end, there was never an article written on the topic."

Months went by and Beadle didn't give a second thought to the reply he had sent the reporter. Then he loaded up the game.

"I remember sitting down, putting the disc for *Assassin's Creed* in, and firing it up. And this message popped up on the screen. I was like, 'Wait a second, what?'

"The next day, I went into the office and messaged Jade about the disclaimer at the beginning of the game. She said, 'Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you. The dev team and I loved it so much that we wanted to put it in the start of the game because we thought it represented all of us.'"

The opening screen displayed above was featured in *Assassin's Creed Unity.*

CHAPTER TWO

THE EZIO TRILOGY

ASSASSIN'S CREED II

After the success of *Assassin's Creed*, two important things happened. One was surprising, the other was not.

The unsurprising thing was that Ubisoft wanted a sequel. The Montréal team had created a solid foundation for a brand-new franchise and after years of working on the original, they had a lot of ideas that they wanted to implement in a follow-up title. Yet they also knew that there were shortcomings.

The surprising thing was how much Ubisoft was prepared to bet on a sequel to *Assassin's Creed*. In the wake of that first title, Jade Raymond and Co. went out to Paris to pitch a second game in the franchise to Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot. The presentation was a success, but then came something Raymond was completely unprepared for.

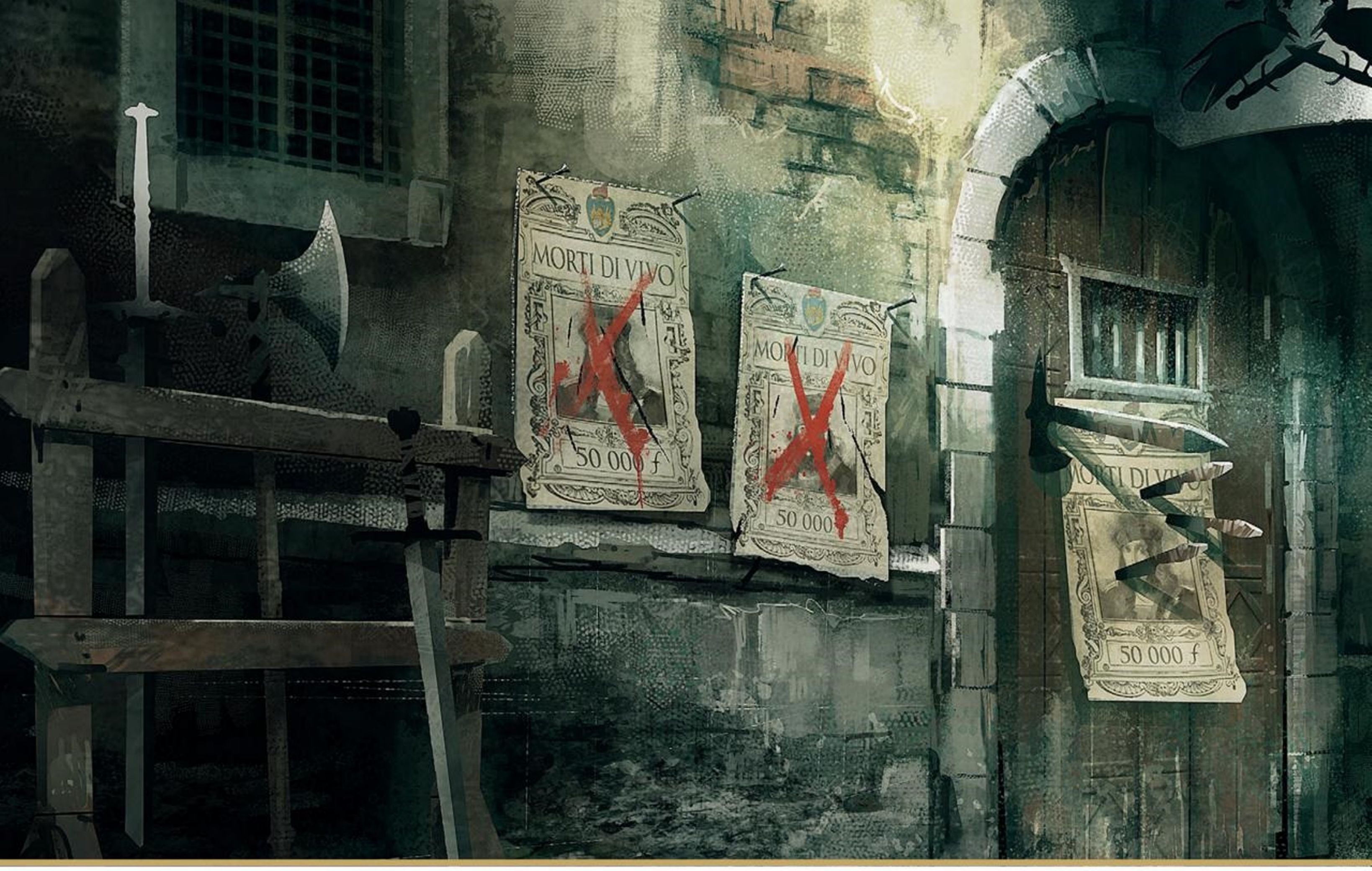
"We presented the pitch for *Assassin's Creed II* to Yves and he said it was great," she remembers. "But then, after the meeting, he told me he wanted to give us an even bigger budget than we had requested. He wanted us to be even more ambitious.

"That's probably the only time in my career I've been told that. Usually it's 'Okay, that's good, but try and do it with fewer people and for less money.'"

As well as being allowed to grow the core Montréal team, Raymond was allowed to use two extra studios from Ubisoft's growing network of developers around the world. Ubisoft Annecy and Ubisoft Singapore were brought into the mix and—alongside Montréal—set about creating something even more ambitious than the first *Assassin's Creed*.

While this increased budget could be viewed as a recognition of *Assassin's Creed*'s impact on Ubisoft, it was also an indication of how the games industry changed at that point in time. During the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 generation, the budgets of blockbuster games soared, creating something akin to an arms race in the industry.

"I also think Yves felt that we were entering this era of monster games," Raymond explains. "AAA was no longer good enough, it had to be quadruple-A. If you look at the difference between *Grand Theft Auto III* and *Grand Theft Auto IV*, or what Activision was doing with *Call of*



Duty, where they were reducing the number of games they made and putting all their studios onto a couple of franchises.

"I think Yves felt like that was the best strategy: make fewer games, but go really big on them. Only a big publisher like Ubisoft could do that. And obviously, he felt like *Assassin's Creed* was big enough that we could do that. He wanted to make the bet, and looking at the market, he probably thought this was the right approach."

THE BROTHERHOOD

With the increased backing of Ubisoft and a larger pool of developers at their disposal, the Ubisoft Montréal team started work on *Assassin's Creed II* in January 2008. Though the task in front of them was hugely ambitious, they had a lot to work from, and they had learned a lot from the franchise's debut.

"Clearly the narrative was important," Guesdon says. "The present-day story was hugely important and—at the time—still very mysterious. The ending of *Assassin's Creed* is full of suspense with the Bleeding Effect. All of a sudden, the player is asking themselves what is going on, why can they see these cryptic visuals in the world?

"The narrative was obviously one of the key pillars, while the visual quality and animation were definitely factors that put us above and beyond. Also, there were things like inertia; you could feel the weight of Altaïr when you touched the ground. He was not just a floaty avatar like in many other games. Therefore, the quality of animation, quality of visual, and quality of narrative were all very good."

During *Assassin's Creed*'s development, the team had come up with a massive list of potential ideas for gameplay that never made it into that release.

"We had this huge corkboard covered in Post-it Notes for all the different features that we wanted to make for *Assassin's Creed*," Bergeron says. "At the end of development, something like a quarter of those Post-it Notes had been removed; we still had three-quarters of the board filled with features."

The studio had less than two years to make *Assassin's Creed II*—the game was already set to come out in November 2009—meaning that the team had to be careful with what gameplay features they decided to pursue.

"A lot of this process is knowing what you want to do, and then choosing what's gonna have the biggest impact for the game," Bergeron explains. "And we knew we didn't have the luxury of a lot of time."

The aim with *Assassin's Creed II* was to tell a much grander story than the first entry in the series, as well as focus more on narrative. The team also wanted to add in new "verbs"—things that the player can do—into its game design philosophy.

"In *Assassin's Creed*, the only verb we had was 'kill,'" Bergeron explains. "That was the only objective we had. We had to come up with new verbs for *Assassin's Creed II*, and from there design the stories we wanted to tell with those blocks."

One of the guiding lights for the group was increasing the amount of content for players to experience, but also making sure that everything about the game was, well, enjoyable.

"The things that were fun in *Assassin's Creed*—running on rooftops, parkouring around the cities, fighting, and actually being stealthy—were not what the player was being asked to do about seventy percent of the time.

"You had to do all these investigations to unlock your assassination mission, but they were not requiring you to use the fun mechanics. Players enjoyed parkouring around the city; instead we were asking them to sit on a bench and eavesdrop. They wanted to be in sword fights with guards, but we asked them to get into fistfights and beat someone up.

"It wasn't in sync. So, we asked ourselves what our core gameplay pillars were. These were social stealth, fighting, and navigation."

These three pillars can perhaps best be seen in the redesigned guards of *Assassin's Creed II*. Whereas before these foes were limited to patrolling the streets and only attacking if the player provoked them or broke enough rules, now your foes were far more versatile.

"You had the Agiles, who chased you, even on rooftops," Guesdon says. "Even there you weren't safe. Then there were the big armored Brutes, who were super tough to fight. And finally, there's the Seekers with their long sticks that were able to get you out of bales of hay, for example."

This extended into how the team designed other nonplayable factions within the world of *Assassin's Creed II*.

"The Thieves would run with you, the Mercenaries would fight you, and the Courtesans could hide you," Guesdon explains. "Those three pillars really became the structure of everything."

Of course, trying to implement this gameplay required an awful lot of work. In order to introduce these mechanics, the AI systems from *Assassin's Creed* needed to be entirely rebuilt.

"Every time you take a game and try to make it better, you realize that a lot of things have to be reworked from the ground up," Puel says. "For instance, we needed to take out the AI from *Assassin's Creed* and rebuild it from scratch. It's always risky and feels like surgery. We had an incredibly talented team that took that risk.

"But it also meant that for months and months, we were not able to truly play the game while the team was building the AI."

If there is one word to describe the approach that the group took to improving upon the formula of *Assassin's Creed*, it would be "depth." Every system from the original game was improved upon and vastly expanded.

That's not to say there was nothing new in *Assassin's Creed II*—far from it. For one thing, the team introduced an in-game economy system inspired by role-playing games (RPGs).

"One of our mottos was 'Everybody becomes an opportunity,'" Guesdon says.

"It had to give players the chance either to hide, or—for example—to pickpocket. A huge addition was the economic system; this meant we could add a lot of content and value to the experience. Players suddenly have their own personal objectives to set. If they want new armor or a particular resource, how do they get the money for that? That was the first step toward really giving players more agency."

A NEW HERO

Along with a new setting, players would also be taking on the role of a new main character in *Assassin's Creed II*. This likely wasn't surprising when you consider this title takes place several hundred years after the original.

"Every Assassin is inspired by the time period they're in," Puel explains. "I think it's fair to say that when we talk about the Third Crusade, it was a difficult period. Those were dark times and we wanted a hero who reflected that very violent time period where religion was everywhere. In that setting, a warrior-monk made sense.

"But when you move to the Renaissance and want to express what that period was like, we wrote a character who has more panache, who is flamboyant, who reflects this time period. The hero in the Italian Renaissance couldn't be a warrior-monk."

Enter Ezio—or Ezio Auditore da Firenze, to give him his full title. While Altaïr was raised from birth to be a stoic killing machine, Ezio came to the assassin life after the death of his family.

"The first pitch for the narrative was a hero's journey in all its essence," Guesdon remembers. "It was about taking a teenager whose life is nice and who lacks for nothing. But then everything crumbles. How does he get out of that? He has lost his entire family, so he needs to

hide. It's similar to *The Count of Monte Cristo*; he will come back. Vengeance is already a strong motivator."

Much of the same design language was used for Ezio as was used for Altaïr. Both have white robes with red detailing, both have bird of prey–inspired peaks on their hoods. Ezio's name is even derived from the Greek for eagle.

But because of his arrogance and flamboyance, the developers came up with a different set of references for Ezio.

"If you pay attention to the visuals we use for him, Ezio's attitude is similar to that of a bullfighter," explains Aymar Azaïzia, the director of transmedia and business development for Ubisoft Montréal. "The way he poses, the way he strikes, is about having a real kind of bravado. He acts like he is good and he knows it. That bullfighter attitude helped shape the character. That's why he has the cape over one of his shoulders.

"That's very different from Altaïr, who was driven and efficient. Ezio has some panache that we didn't see before. The whole point wasn't to make a clone of Altaïr hundreds of years later. The point was to discover someone new."

Not only was he more of a charismatic character than Altaïr, Ezio was also going to have more development. *Assassin's Creed II* was a huge project with a far bigger scope compared to the original game's nine missions. This allowed the team to show the character in a greater variety of situations.

"We had access to what we call 'walk and talks,'" Bergeron says. "In *Assassin's Creed*, we couldn't have an NPC walk beside you while things were calm in order to provide narrative exposition. For example, we could not have done that quest where Leonardo da Vinci is walking Ezio through Venice before.

"The variety of objectives allowed us to tell a richer story that wasn't purely about killing. We were trying to tell the story of a nobleman's son who has been wronged and who is seeking revenge. We wanted to have a deeper background to this character, so we had some quests where you'd be picking flowers or going on a date with a girl, which we wouldn't have been able to do before."

Jeffrey Yohalem, who acted as a writer and a lead writer on several *Assassin's Creed* games, adds, "In *Assassin's Creed*, missions are obstacle courses. They just test your abilities to collect certain things, and there isn't much framing. In *Assassin's Creed II* and onward, we had a lot more time to properly flesh out those side missions and make them character driven.

"We got to revolutionize game narrative, too, and really focus on character. The idea is that every mission and every moment of gameplay connects with an emotion or a side of the person who you're playing. In *Assassin's Creed II*, you gather feathers for a mother who went through a terrible trauma that's only hinted at in the script, and she's not speaking about it. You collect feathers for her that remind her of her dead son. Ultimately, that incredible gesture causes her to break out of that state of grief."

Thanks to Ubisoft's increased investment in *Assassin's Creed II*, the team could add a lot more depth to the world. This included linear gameplay sequences that were created by the Ubisoft Singapore team, which were hidden areas that players could complete in order to be rewarded with Assassin seals.

"These were experiences that typically lasted between ten and twenty minutes," Ubisoft producer Karl Luhe says. "At the beginning we thought we would try making ten and then cut a few of them away if they didn't meet the quality we wanted or if we weren't quick enough to finish them all. But in the end, all ten were in the game, so we were really happy with that."

Guesdon adds, "The team, they added a real depth to the open world. It was not just at the surface anymore. You could enter the buildings and discover caves, the interiors of the big basilica, churches, and so on. But at some point, Ubisoft HQ said, 'Okay, all this is cool, but we need to go big.' And we added more."

FROM ITALY WITH LOVE

Compared to the Third Crusade, there were a lot more famous historical figures present during the Italian Renaissance, at least ones who are better known to the general public.

"When you say the Third Crusade to someone, it's hard for them to identify famous historical figures from the period. When you mention the name of someone from that age, people probably won't know who they are. But when you talk about the Italian Renaissance, people have at least heard of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Leonardo, Donatello, Raphael, and Michelangelo," Bergeron laughs.

"Anybody who's been to school a little bit has an idea of the Italian Renaissance. We were starting from a better position when it comes to pop culture knowledge of that era."

Raymond adds, "One of the things that were so appealing about the Italian Renaissance was how well known the characters are in that period. Everyone has heard of Leonardo da Vinci. A lot of people have heard

"ONE OF THE THINGS THAT WERE SO APPEALING ABOUT THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE WAS HOW WELL KNOWN THE CHARACTERS ARE IN THAT PERIOD."

of Machiavelli, and *Machiavellian* is a commonly used term. There's also the Medicis and so on. When we talk about the promise of the *Assassin's Creed* brand—living pivotal moments in history, meeting some of these key people and learning some of their stories from a different perspective—we felt that the characters really put the Italian Renaissance over the top."

While ultimately a fascinating and colorful period in which to set a game, the Italian Renaissance wasn't a hit with everyone. In fact, when Ubisoft focus tested the setting in the US, the results didn't inspire a lot of confidence.

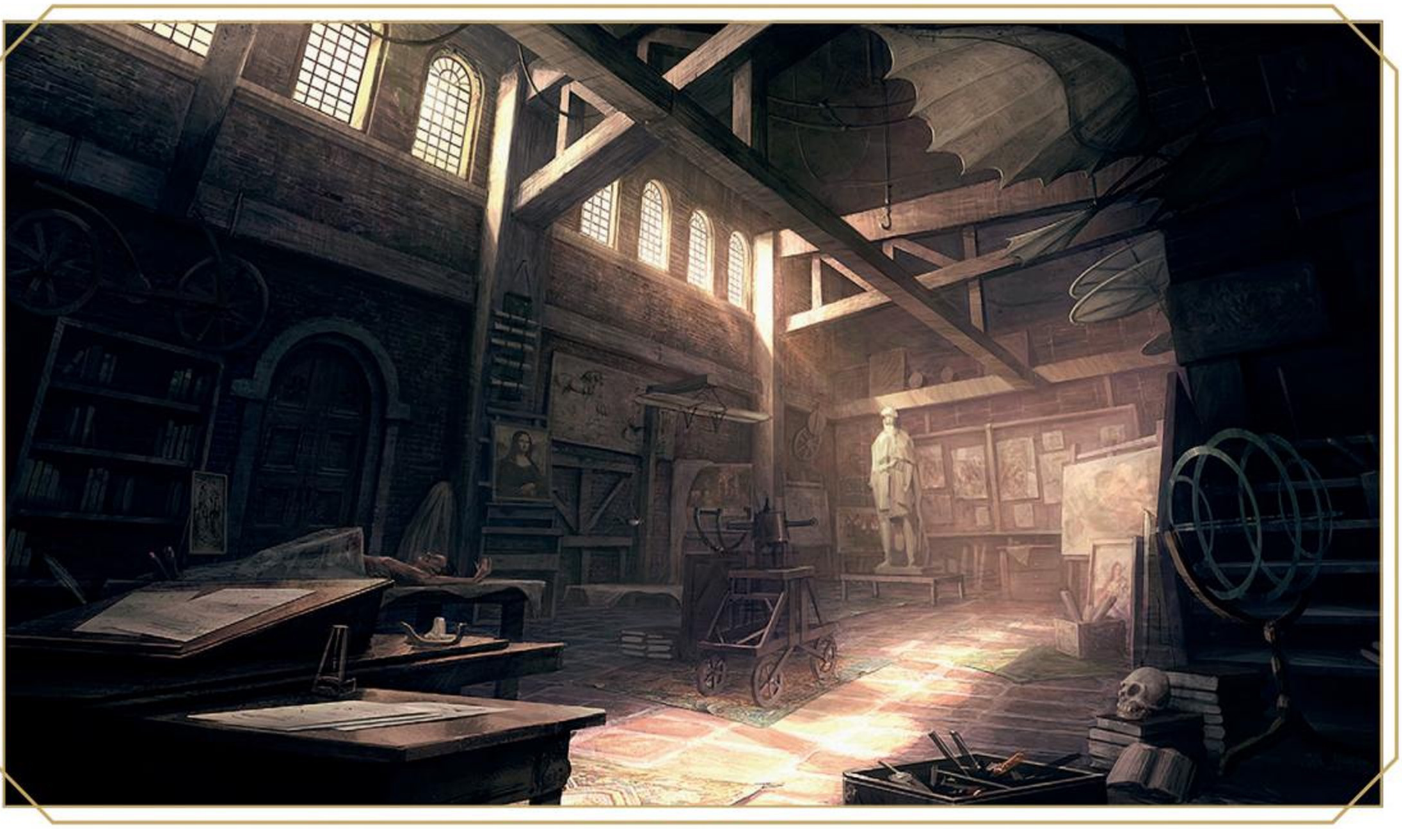
"I remember vividly when we started our first consumer experience," Azaïzia says. "We gathered some players and were testing ideas and concepts with them. The first tests that we conducted in the US were absolutely horrible. We asked players about the Renaissance as a setting and they were just thinking about Renaissance fairs, dragons, and knights. You see a lot of games with historical settings, like strategy titles, but it's quite unusual to have an action-adventure game with that kind of setting."

With *Assassin's Creed II*, the team decided to double down on featuring historical characters who were alive during the period. Perhaps the most notable of these is the famed artist and inventor Leonardo da Vinci. He serves as Ezio's gadget man, furnishing the Assassin with goodies such as a flying machine, as well as upgrading our hero's equipment.

On paper, this definitely sounds like it could be cheesy and insensitive; after all, these were real people that the team was portraying.

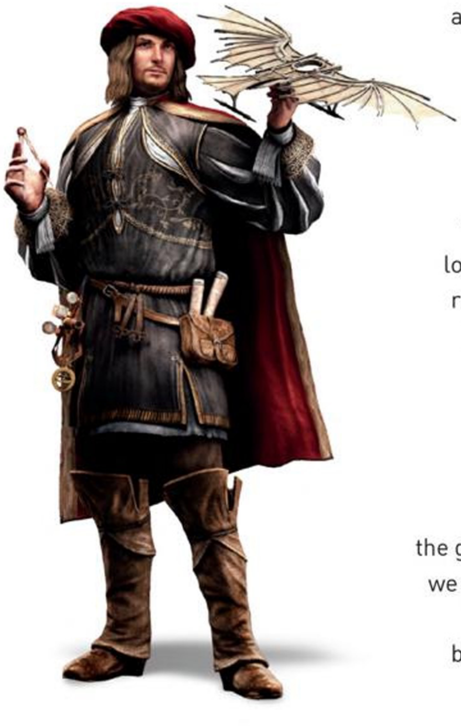
"During *Assassin's Creed II*, the brand was maturing," Bergeron says. "We were becoming better at understanding exactly what it was; it's about putting players in a historical context. And a historical context is not only about the environment, but also the people that inhabit it.

"Our idea was that it'd be cool to meet the people who inhabited these places in history. That did bring its own



challenges: these people had a life. We knew where they were in any given period of time. Some people are less documented than others. But someone like Leonardo da Vinci has been researched quite extensively. There's quite a few books written on him, so we have a general understanding of where he was in his life."

The specific time frame of *Assassin's Creed II* also allowed the game to feature a slightly different Leonardo da Vinci to what most people have seen before.



"Leonardo da Vinci was young at the time," Guesdon says. "We're used to the old man with his long beard. We thought this was a really good opportunity to not have Leonardo as the old, wise mentor, but as the very vibrant, living, full-of-energy man that he actually was. He was perfect to play the role of Q, like in the James Bond films, giving the player all the gadgets, all these new systems that we wanted to bring to players.

"He was perfect because everybody knows him."

Portraying Leonardo da Vinci was fairly easy given that he is an ally to Ezio. But the team had to be slightly more cautious when it came to *Assassin's Creed II*'s real-life antagonists.

"Rodrigo Borgia was our main bad guy for *Assassin's Creed II*," Bergeron explains. "We had to always tell our stories as 'Here's your target, but you can't reach them.' There was a lot of jumping through hoops to make sure that we extended that person's lifespan to the right moment. These are people who died in very specific places because of very specific situations. That was constraining for us, since as quest designers, we wanted to introduce these people but we didn't want the player to be able to kill them until they actually died in history, so as not to create an anachronistic timeline."

In a way, not being able to kill some of the characters due to historical reasons results in a more complex tapestry of the era. You aren't just seeing the beliefs of Ezio and his allies; you are also being exposed to conflicting ideologies.

"Getting to know these people who are part of a historical period adds another dimension," Bergeron says. "We were presenting players with a different perspective on the time period that they wouldn't have seen if they were just killing people. We have the chance to portray the ethics, values, and philosophies of a given time period through the characters' words and actions."

Urheberrechtlich geschütztes Material

In order to balance real-life events with the desire to be able to create fun situations for players to enjoy in *Assassin's Creed II*, the team created what it called the thirty-second rule.

"The idea was that if someone Googles an event, a character, a location, a building, or whatever, what they discover by quickly reading for thirty seconds, that's what we need to respect. That's the history," Guesdon explains. "Now, because we know almost everything about someone like Leonardo da Vinci's life—we know where he was and when, what he did, and so on—we didn't want to respect all of this. You could find that out, but you would need to look much deeper than just typing his name into a search engine.

"So, we respected the big dates and who he was, but that gave us enough room to bend reality and tell our story in the middle."

HOME SWEET HOME

While the main Montréal team was hard at work on the core of *Assassin's Creed II*, in December 2008 Ubisoft's Annecy studio was brought in to work on a specific part of the experience: the Villa Auditore, the fictional ancestral home of Ezio. They were also responsible for the very real city of Monteriggioni where it was located.

"It was a super-focused project," Ubisoft Annecy art director Mathieu Granjon says. "At first glance, you might think this was just a bit of outsourcing, but it was more of a collaboration because we pushed a lot of ideas. To be totally transparent, it wouldn't have stayed in the game if it wasn't decent enough. It was a test. But it was really good and very appreciated by all the team. They really wanted to keep it and for us to go to the end."

The idea of having an area of the game where the player can just chill out was something entirely new.

"There are some new features here that had never been in a game before," Granjon says. "I don't know if this idea of a homestead, that the character has a home that the player has to take care of, was new. But it was the first time that it had been done on this scale in a AAA game."

When it came to designing the villa, the Annecy studio approached the project with story in mind. Everything had to have some kind of relation to the story.

"The design for each room in the villa was done with some kind of narrative or gameplay purpose," Granjon explains. "There is the Leonardo da Vinci room, the mini city room where you can see the progress you have made at restoring Monteriggioni. There is the nest on the top of the tower, which is quite a secret room. There is the underground. There are a lot of things like that. All those details were done with the narrative in mind."

As mentioned earlier, while the city of Monteriggioni is very real, the Villa Auditore is not. It does have a real-world inspiration in the Villa di Maiano, which holds a special place in Granjon's heart.

"The Montréal team's art director, Mohamed Gambouz, asked me to find a design for the villa," he explains. "I'm French, but my mother comes from an Italian family, so I spent a lot of time in Italy when I was young. I had this image of this villa in my mind, and I spent three days searching for a photo of this place on Google. Eventually I found it, and he agreed that this was what we needed to aim for. This villa is part of my childhood. I must have gone there on a school trip when I was young."

Assassin's Creed II producer Sébastien Puel felt that creating the villa was a hugely important addition to the story.

"If you look at all the great heroes out there, most of the time, you know where they live," he says. "You know where they hide out. That created a deeper connection with the character."

Creating the city of Monteriggioni was also a challenge. While it was a real place that the group could visit and take reference photos of, this was the Annecy team's first attempt at translating reality into a video game.

"It feels quite authentic if you take a bird's-eye view of the city," Granjon says. "The problem is in creating organic cities without a lot of navigational constraints, so that the player doesn't end up stuck in a location with no way out. All those elements had to be very well chosen to create the feeling that it's not just a level designed to look like a city, but that it's an actual historical city.

"This is the main challenge in each *Assassin's Creed* because every time we create a real city, there have to be systems created that feel rich and vibrant but which are actually inside a quite constrained system."

Though it still required a lot of hard work, *Assassin's Creed II* was a far less treacherous development than the original *Assassin's Creed*. For one thing, the crew didn't have to flesh out an entirely new IP; they also didn't have to build an engine from scratch to power this new creation.

"What stands out to me is just how smooth development was compared to the original *Assassin's Creed*," Raymond explains. "We had an engine that worked, we had a full team, we knew what the brand was, and we had a list of features. The other thing that stood out to

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me was that we had a better understanding of the storytelling we wanted to do."

In contrast to *Assassin's Creed*, the team was able to do more conventional storytelling in *Assassin's Creed II*. For the first title, Ubisoft's chief creative officer had mandated that the player should never lose control of the character, even during cutscenes.

"We were able to more fully realize the story and cinematic moments that we had in mind," Raymond explains. "Obviously for an action-adventure that element is really important. In my opinion, the biggest difference that players felt, possibly without being able to put their fingers on it, was that it was like a well-realized story with cinematics in it."

There was also a desire to shake up the way the plot in *Assassin's Creed II* would be told. It needed to be more unpredictable.

"To me, *Assassin's Creed* was incredibly beautiful and photorealistic, but it felt a bit empty," Yohalem admits. "After playing it, I bumped into Patrice. He was taking a smoke break one day, and I was outside at the same time. So, I started talking to him about what I thought was missing from that game. He ended up interviewing me about what I would add or change in the first game. I don't remember what I said specifically in that meeting at all, but I definitely said that the story had to be less predictable. The first game was designed so that players knew the number of assassinations that they were going to have to do. It was always the same idea: the player went after a target and then they killed the target. Players already knew in advance what was going to happen. I suggested making things less predictable. It should be a story where you don't know what's going to happen next because the narrative structure is less visible."

Yohalem was hired to help design the game's economic system, but ended up working on its script, having previously graduated from Yale with a degree in English literature. If nothing else, he wanted to drag video games from being narratively clunky—due to the medium previously lacking the fidelity to portray the subtleties of real human emotions—to being on the same level as theater, TV, and film.

"There were scenes where a character would do something that was inconsistent with that character's drive or desires," he remembers. "Accordingly, I highlighted things like that, as well as moments where subtext could be written into the lines. That was a big deal because in games before that, a character's visual expressions weren't very clear because they were so pixelated or weren't high fidelity. Characters weren't mo-capped, so writers had been putting subtext—the character's actual desire in a scene—into the text. In real life and dramas, characters hide those desires. They could be talking about fixing a car with someone, but really what they're talking about is wanting to hook up with that person."

The team knew they were working on something huge. This was going to be the next big thing, a project that realized what the developers had tried to do with the original *Assassin's Creed*.

Assassin's Creed II was shown off for the first time at E3 with a CGI trailer that showed Ezio hunting down his targets at a masked ball. This trailer was created in collaboration with Digic Pictures, a 3D animation studio that specializes in CGI, and a company that Ubisoft continues to work with in the present day. Getting the trailer from Budapest, Hungary—where Digic is located—to Ubisoft's Paris HQ ahead of E3 was a bit of a trial.

"At the time, the internet was not as fast as it is now," Baccard remembers. "To be able to transfer a file, especially before E3—when everyone was sending files on the Ubisoft network—was incredibly slow. Getting the trailer from Budapest to Paris would have taken days. Literally, days. Therefore, we had to put someone on a plane to get a hard drive from Budapest to Paris that same day. Then we gave the hard drive to the Paris HQ before they left for Los Angeles. Thankfully, they managed to get it in time. Today, it's much simpler; it's just downloading a few gigabytes."

This was followed up by a gameplay demo—with the same setting—that had our protagonist using a flying machine developed by Leonardo da Vinci.

"Demos at the time were not recorded; they were played live," Ubisoft Montréal senior producer Julien Laferrière says. "I remember having goose bumps and nerves about whether everything would go according to plan. Would we showcase the good stuff? Would we crash the flying wing? That sort of thing. It ended up being a really, really cool moment. Surreal, to be honest."

In the wake of this fancy reveal, hype soared once more. But as opposed to the original *Assassin's Creed*—where the development team had to cut content in order to meet the release date—the studio found this round of hype much more positive.

"For us, it was fuel," Bergeron says. "It was the exact opposite of what we had been feeling at the end of the original *Assassin's Creed*. We had put so much effort and so much love into it; we finally had a version that we were all happy with. *This* is the game we wanted to make when we're making *Assassin's Creed*. This demo showcased it

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"ASSASSIN'S CREED II HELPED DEFINE THE OPEN-WORLD GAME AS WE KNOW IT TODAY."

and people reacted so positively. We definitely felt we were onto something.

"Even before showing it, we had a pretty good idea that we were on the right track and the reaction was all the confirmation we needed. We just had to finish it. The end of *Assassin's Creed II*'s production was amazing. The entire production was probably one of the best in my career, to be honest. With the first game, it felt like we were almost slapped in the face, and we knew we could have done better. We knew what we needed to do. The reaction to the trailer told us that we had put our eggs in the right basket; we just needed to finish it."

As part of the process of promoting *Assassin's Creed II*, Ubisoft rented a villa in Florence for a press event. Despite working on the game—and re-creating the cities of Florence and Venice—some of the staff hadn't yet traveled to Italy.

"One night, we had two hours free and we all went on a tour of the city," Puel remembers. "I said to my team, 'Okay. Now take me to the Duomo.' And several people who had never been to Italy before were like, 'Oh, I think it's left here, then right, and left again.' They navigated us to the Duomo because they'd learned the city from making this game. That was truly an amazing moment."

Assassin's Creed II went on to launch in November 2009 to almost universal acclaim. If the original title was only an appetizer of the vision that the team had had for this new franchise, its sequel was the full meal. Critically, it was a smash hit, as well as hitting it out of the park commercially. Within its first week, *Assassin's Creed II* had sold 1.6 million copies around the world, with shipments closing in on 9 million units by May of the following year.

Not only did it properly establish a franchise that would help define Ubisoft for the coming years, *Assassin's Creed II* helped define the open-world game as we know it today.

"We didn't do open worlds until we worked on *Assassin's Creed*," Bergeron says. "That established what making open-world games was at Ubisoft. *Assassin's Creed II* set the benchmark for the modern open-world format, both for us and the rest of the industry. When it comes to open-world games, the industry emulates parts that we originated. We're definitely proud of that."

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ASSASSIN'S CREED BROTHERHOOD

BANDING TOGETHER

From the start, the *Assassin's Creed* core team had envisioned the series being a trilogy. The third and final part of the franchise was to be set in the year 2012.

"Initially we looked up the Mayan calendar that predicted the end of the world in 2012," Raymond says. "We thought: 'Okay, we'll be able to make three games. And the last game will take place in 2012, in the present day.' Everything that Desmond had learned through reliving these past lives was going to help with this final episode. That was the original plan."

Guesdon adds, "The idea with this trilogy was to send the message that everything is cyclical. Destruction would occur and humankind would start anew. But in the far future, people would have looked at Desmond's story and would have viewed him as some kind of prophet-type figure."

These plans changed with the wild success of *Assassin's Creed II*, which was even more of a critical and commercial hit than its predecessor. What was meant to be a series with a finite number of entries and a clear endpoint became a forever franchise.

During *Assassin's Creed II*'s development, it was decided that the team would follow up with an expansion or piece of DLC. This was titled *Brotherhood* and it was set to be an expansion of the main game. As history shows, this plan didn't last long. Very quickly, *Brotherhood* became its own *Assassin's Creed* title.

"*Brotherhood* took place in the same timeline as *Assassin's Creed II*; Ezio is the only character who has starred in more than one game," Raymond says. "That was really the shift. It was supposed to be Ezio and then a different Assassin. It broke that initial plan. And, with the second game being even more successful than the first, it was clear that the franchise wasn't going to stop after three entries."

"We were asking ourselves, 'What is a game called *Brotherhood* about?'" Yohalem explains. "The game director talked about it being on your phone, but that

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didn't end up happening. It was a game where the player was going to train Assassins. Then the art director had this idea that he wanted the city to start out in rough shape. There would be these three to five layers where the city would go from seedy to glorious. He had figured out how to create that sense of transformation with these layers, and was really invested in that idea."

This became a portion of the game similar to the Villa Auditore from *Assassin's Creed II*, where the player could restore and renovate the city of Rome.

The actual name of *Brotherhood* was something of a debate. Yes, this was a sequel to *Assassin's Creed II*, but did it do enough to be the next numbered entry in the franchise?

"During development there was a lot of discussion. Should we call this *Assassin's Creed III*? Should it be *Assassin's Creed Rome*?" Guesdon says. "In the end, *Brotherhood* just made the most sense."

While the team had almost two years to create *Assassin's Creed II*, *Brotherhood* was made in far less time. But by this point, everyone had a lot more familiarity with the tools at their disposal. The game had a solid foundation in *Assassin's Creed II*.

"We were building on the know-how and technology that we had," Bergeron says. "We were making the best we could with what we knew how to do, which is fun in and of itself. The great part about working on DLC is that you don't have to create things from scratch; the technology is already stable. Your tools are stable, and you know how to use them. *Brotherhood* was that for us. We knew how this engine worked, we knew how the tools worked, and we knew our character. We wanted to continue his story and make it even better."

WHEN IN ROME

Like *Assassin's Creed II*, *Brotherhood* was hugely inspired by ideas the team had wanted to implement in the previous game, but which they weren't able to due to production constraints, including the setting.

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"Rome was supposed to be part of *Assassin's Creed II*," Bergeron says. "We had said that the game would have three cities: Venice, Florence, and Rome. But quickly into production, we realized that it just wasn't going to fit within our scope. It wasn't possible."

As part of the process of creating Rome in *Brotherhood*, the team stumbled across a map from 1461 that helped the developers come up with a layout.

"It was very interesting because medieval Rome was much smaller than it was during the Roman Empire," Guesdon remembers. "There was this mix between a newer Renaissance-style building, that we could basically reuse from *Assassin's Creed II*, and structures from Roman antiquity, like the Colosseum and the Roman baths. In *Brotherhood* we could do a fresh take on these older buildings."

Due to *Brotherhood*'s short development timeline, the team could only focus on one setting. Whereas *Assassin's Creed II* had featured a few cities with a variety of activities that the player could engage in, Ubisoft had to figure out how to make the most of just one city.

"We focused entirely on Rome," Guesdon says. "We wanted to have three different types of environments to support our gameplay pillars. Having a dense, urban city was essential for social stealth. There were the ruins, which the player could navigate around. Finally, there were open areas—the countryside—where we could use the horse. We basically divided this massive map into three big sectors supporting different types of gameplay."

Bergeron adds, "People wanted to play around in a larger given space. That's where the format for Rome came about—the idea that there was only one world in *Brotherhood*, which meant people had a bigger, cohesive space."

From there, the team came up with ways to fit a narrative within the version of Rome that it was creating.

"We worked hard to identify landmarks that would be the key visual points," Guesdon says. "When you first structure the space, you want to have very cool and significant locations to visit during missions or during the story. From Castel Sant'Angelo, where the pope was, to Tiber Island, where we put Ezio's hideout. There's also the Pyramid of Cestius, which is actually built into the Aurelian Walls around the city. The pyramid is super cool and it helped us craft all the hidden societies in the game."

Ezio's character arc in *Brotherhood* was also intended to be part of *Assassin's Creed II*.

"We wanted to do a lot more within *Assassin's Creed II*," Guesdon says. "Our initial intent was to bring Ezio from a teenager to the mentor role that he eventually takes on in *Brotherhood*, but all in the same game. That was too much, obviously. But we knew this character was so rich; we already had thought about him becoming a mentor. The material for *Brotherhood* was already in gestation."

Puel adds, "It's an extension of *Assassin's Creed II*. We just wanted to tell stories about the Italian Renaissance. *Assassin's Creed II* would have been too big if we had included Rome; it's a huge city. But it's hard to talk about the Italian Renaissance without talking about Rome. About all the power that was there, and about the charismatic figures of the different popes. In my mind, this was one game because this is one story."

The Montréal team was also able to expand upon some of the systems present in the first two *Assassin's Creed* games.

"There was a huge evolution of the fighting system in *Brotherhood*," community development manager Gabriel Graziani remembers. "Inevitably you are going to get into a fight. This was when we started to lock down combat, so that the counters were extremely varied. We got to spend more time working with those really tried-and-true systems that made *Brotherhood*. It's just so polished and looks much better than *Assassin's Creed II*—and that game already looked incredible."

Having introduced a variety of new gameplay verbs into *Assassin's Creed*'s design philosophy with the second entry in the series, the team was able to see which of these were popular and which the players would like to occur less.

"We knew that our gameplay blocks on the quest side had pretty good legs. We knew we could create a lot of cool stories," Bergeron says. "But we also knew that some blocks, like the tailing blocks, weren't the most well received based on data we were getting from players. We were able to reconfigure and readjust the numbers to change how often that kind of block came around."

THE RULING CLASS

When it came to the story, Yohalem wanted to improve upon the already higher quality of script he had helped shepherd in with *Assassin's Creed II*. One of the new core elements to *Brotherhood*'s gameplay was the recruitment mechanic, by which Ezio can bring onboard nonplayable characters from the world to join the Assassin Brotherhood. These NPCs can then be sent off to do missions for the player, as well as partner up with Ezio for collaborative assassination moves.

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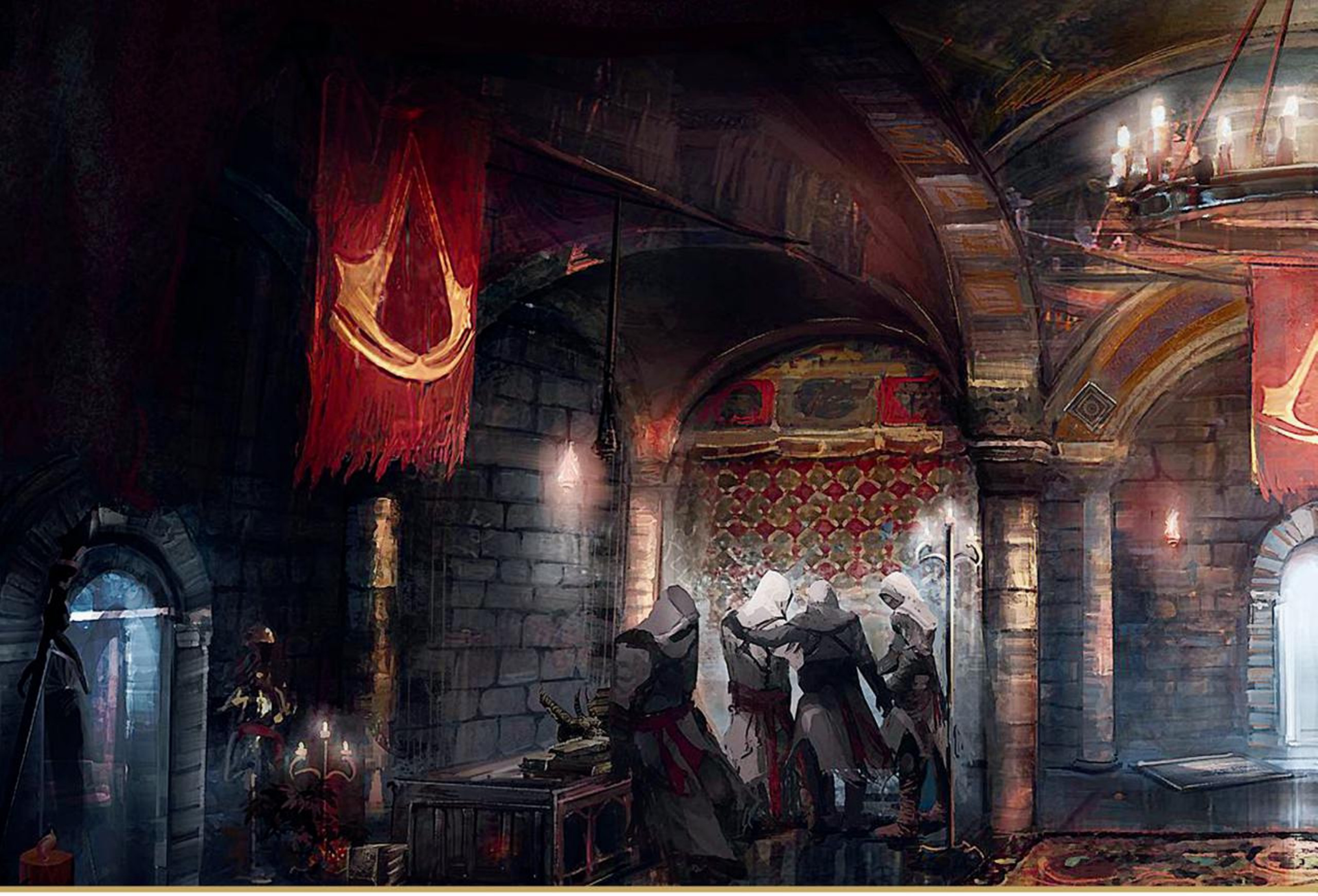

The idea of Ezio rebuilding the Assassins became core to the game's story.

"My goal going into *Brotherhood* was to make the script incredibly tight," he explains. "I wanted to make it structurally and dialoguewise like a movie; every line, every word existed for a reason or it was cut. It was continuing this story, focusing on character and—again—making sure that every line contained subtext and had a reason for being there. Each scene within the entire narrative was very structured."

He continues, "I had been reading Machiavelli's *The Prince*, among many other books. I knew that Machiavelli was going to be a character in *Brotherhood* because the time period was right and he was in Rome then. What if this entire game is about how to be a great leader? Ezio needs to train these Assassins, and he will likely end up becoming the leader of these Assassins. In *The Prince*, there's this idea that you can rule through fear or through love. People misunderstood Machiavelli advocating for rule through fear, because he actually advocates that it's better to rule through love, even though it's harder. He was trying to teach the Medicis how to be good rulers in that book.

"When it came to the bad guys, I figured I could do this really strong narrative structure where the bad guys each represent one of the negative ideas from Machiavelli, while Ezio represents the positive ideas. In the end, Machiavelli will write *The Prince* about Ezio. That fulfilled what I was looking for structurally. The number of ideas that Machiavelli had perfectly matched the number of sequences in the game, so it was just really strong thematically."

Having chased and almost killed Rodrigo Borgia at the end of *Assassin's Creed II*, Ezio was now going to go up against his son, Cesare Borgia, in *Brotherhood*. While Rodrigo was an important and influential figure within the *Assassin's Creed* universe, he was much older than Ezio.

"We had a little bit of fun with the main nemesis in *Brotherhood*," Azaïzia says. "We had a joke internally at Ubisoft where we asked for the archnemesis in *Brotherhood* to not be some old guy with a cane. The first two games have you fighting old men with canes. We wanted someone agile.

"By contrast, Cesare Borgia was a genius. Machiavelli based the *Prince* book on him. He was cunning, fierce, and

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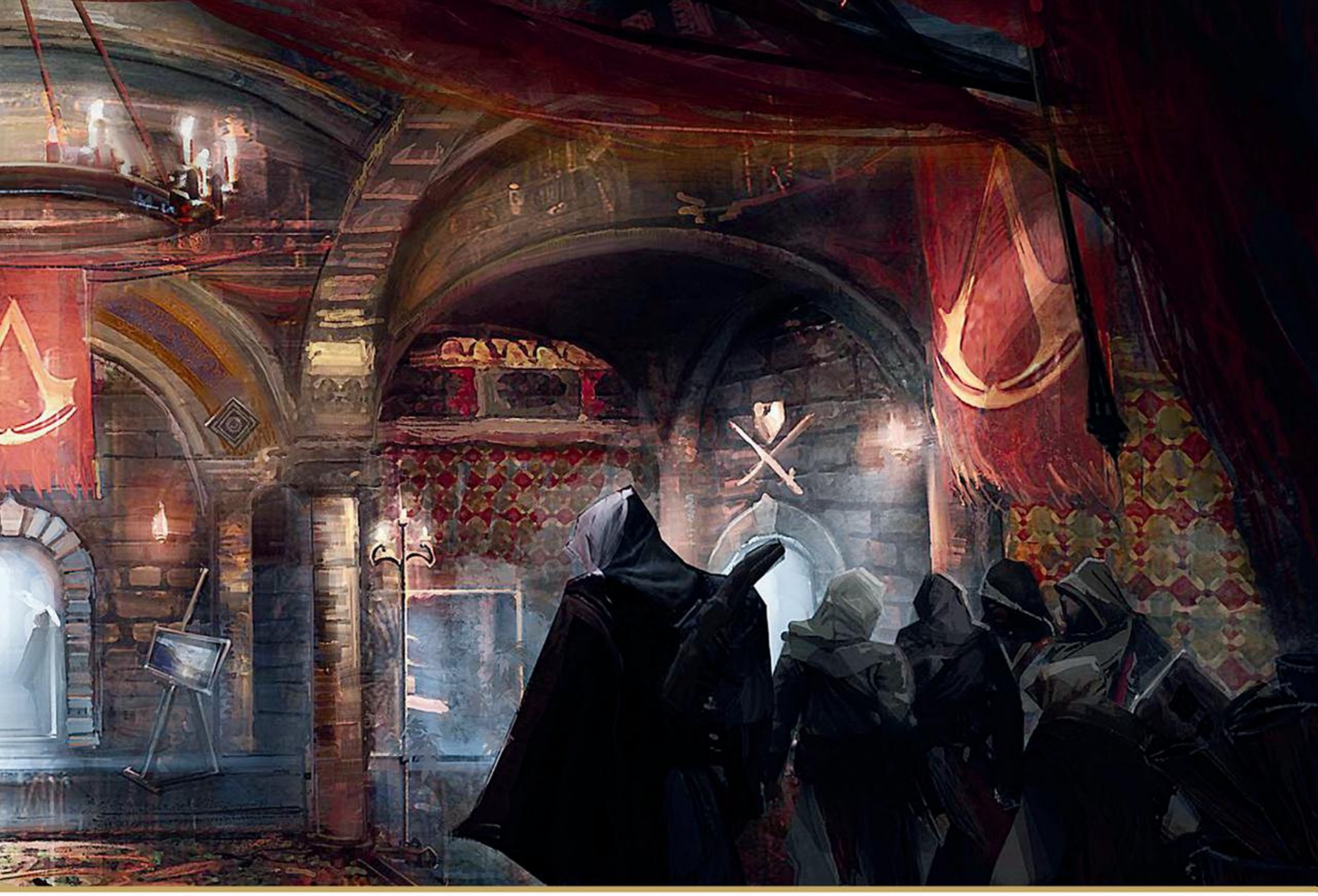


completely ruthless. We wanted someone fit, agile, and strong. Honestly, he was a much better opponent for Ezio. We wanted someone who was the Templar equivalent of Ezio. We spent a lot of time working on his costume, his attitude, making him into an amazing nemesis."

KILLING TOGETHER

In addition to Rome and Ezio's story arc, there had been plans to implement a multiplayer feature within *Assassin's Creed II*. Like those aforementioned aspects, this mode was bumped due to production constraints, not least because the Anvil game engine that powered *Assassin's Creed* was initially incapable of running that kind of gameplay.

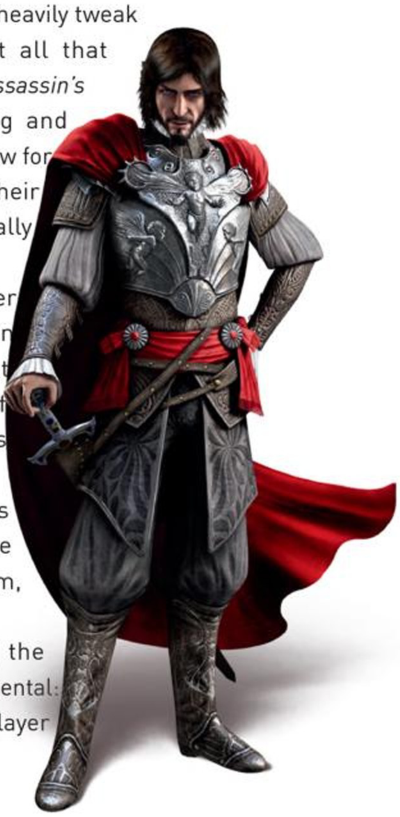
"It wasn't possible at all because Anvil wasn't a multi-player online engine," Granjon says. "Very quickly, we understood that not only was it not technically feasible, but also that the design for multiplayer gameplay hadn't been made very clear when we worked on *Assassin's Creed II*. With *Brotherhood*, we had an extra year to find a very precise core loop for multiplayer mode."

In order to create a multiplayer element for *Brotherhood*, the Annecy team had to heavily tweak the Anvil game engine. This isn't all that surprising when you consider what *Assassin's Creed*'s core pillars are: sprawling and detailed open worlds, crowds that allow for social stealth, and players making their way around this world with fantastically detailed animation work.

"We wanted to have this multiplayer game with huge crowds," Granjon remembers. "Having crowds of about one hundred people required a lot of engineering work. So that's why it was a totally different engine."

He continues, "What makes *Assassin's Creed* a quality title is the good animation, the climbing system, and all the parkour."

But the other challenge facing the Annecy studio was much more fundamental: what does an *Assassin's Creed* multiplayer game look like?



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"The biggest thing was creating something that was fun and interesting enough within this fantasy of being an assassin," Granjon explains. "Over a long period, we iterated around hunting down a target, which is the classic loop in *Assassin's Creed*. However, it was quite difficult because we wanted to give the player clues about where their target was, but didn't want to just give them the solution. The player had to use both strategy and the tools at their disposal to make an informed guess in order to create the opportunity to kill their target."

He continues, "It was quite a long journey to figure out Wanted—the most played, classic murder mode—but when we had the final version of it, it was quite obvious. We did numerous iterations during that first year, though. We iterated on every aspect of the gameplay."

As well as being the hunter tracking down their prey, players were also the hunted. For the Annecy team, figuring out how much feedback to give players on both sides of the equation was critical for nailing *Brotherhood*'s multiplayer mode.

"It was how we paced the game and how many players we had in the loop," Granjon says. "As well as what tools we gave them and how precise the information we provided them with was. For example, we'd tell players that they were in the right zone and that they have to find their target. But we also needed to let them know that the Assassin hunting them down was close by. It might not sound like much, but all of this feedback in the controller, camera, and characters was very complicated to tackle."

The multiplayer feature in *Assassin's Creed* was a very different kind of experience to that found in other AAA blockbuster titles of the time. For starters, it wasn't a fast-paced shooter like *Call of Duty*. As a result, marketing this kind of experience was somewhat challenging.

"I felt that we should showcase the fact that *Assassin's Creed* was definitely not like other multiplayer games on the market," Azaïzia explains. "It was about being cunning, hiding in plain sight, and killing your target. The marketing department was really keen on following the route established by other blockbuster titles or multi-player games. Thankfully, we went with the alternative. It was a better angle that reflected what we wanted to achieve." Any anxiety that this new multiplayer mode wouldn't land with the general public went away the moment the team showed it off to consumers for the first time.

"It was my first time at E3 when we made the reveal of it," Granjon says. "I was discussing it with some friends

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"EVERY CHARACTER WE HAD CREATED FOR THE MULTIPLAYER HAD BEEN REUSED FOR THE SOLO CAMPAIGN."

who work at other studios. The thing I was most proud of was that every character we had created for the multiplayer had been reused for the solo campaign, since it cut down costs to reuse characters as bad guys in the story. The first day we presented the game to the public, we were very stressed; it was quite an original game.

"But at the end of the day, people were queuing for four hours to play the game. It was amazing. Those were probably my best memories in video game development."

The introduction of multiplayer mode was, in fact, part of the reason why this entry in the franchise was given its name.

"At this point, Ezio is rebuilding the Assassin Brotherhood, but this was also the title where we introduced the multiplayer feature," Guesdon says. "Hence having the Brotherhood as the community. People were playing together."

As mentioned earlier, *Brotherhood* was built in record time. This was a team that was performing at the absolute top of their game.

"Everyone was talking about how it was impossible," Yohalem remembers. "Then after the game shipped and did so well and everything was wonderful, I heard that there was no other group of people that could've pulled that off. We were just working nonstop. I mean, I remember finishing the script for *Brotherhood* at dawn one day.

"The pace at which everything was done felt exhilarating. It's hard in this industry because there's this constant drive to iterate, to work and rework something. Michelangelo talked about how his sculptures emerged from the marble and that if you then messed around with them too much, they would fall apart. I think if you're making a work of art, it has to come from that sense of instinct, it has to come from preparation, but you have to make the thing in one shot."

Though created in less than a year, *Brotherhood* was a smash hit with the gaming community. The title was released in November 2010 and quickly became Ubisoft's best-selling launch at the time, selling over 1 million copies within its first week on sale. By the following March, Ubisoft had shipped a total of 7.2 million copies of the game.

It was clear that the appetite for *Assassin's Creed* was huge.

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ASSASSIN'S CREED REVELATIONS

CROSSROADS

Much like *Brotherhood*, *Revelations* started as an expansion for its predecessor. The upcoming *Assassin's Creed III* wasn't ready for release in 2011 and Ubisoft wanted to launch a project that year.

Around the time that *Brotherhood* was greenlit, Ubisoft had decided it wanted to bring in the Foundation 9 Entertainment team, which had made the *Assassin's Creed* spinoffs *Bloodlines* and *Discovery* for the Sony PSP and Nintendo DS respectively, to work on another game that was going to round out Ezio's story. The title was going to have players go first to the Assassins' castle in Masyaf and then to Constantinople.

"I worked on that from probably January to about July 2010," narrative director Darby McDevitt says.

"I was super excited about it. It was set around 1508. Suleiman the Magnificent was gonna be about ten or twelve years old. I pieced together a full story. We were working on the maps. It was really interesting."

Internally the game was code-named Final Episode, but at E3 2010, the Griptonite Games team (which was part of Foundation 9) was surprised to learn their project had been announced as *The Lost Legacy*. Even more surprising was that the project was canceled one month later, in July.

Afterward, McDevitt left Griptonite and signed up for some classes at film school in New York. By October, he was in the process of moving when *Assassin's Creed* creative director Alexandre Amancio called and asked if he was interested in working on a new project in the series.

"He read me a summary of the game that they were making," McDevitt laughs.

"It was the text that I had written explaining Ezio's journey to Masyaf and then Constantinople. He asked whether I'd be interested in working on that project, and I told him he had just read me something I had written. The high-level idea of Ezio going to Constantinople to find the keys to Altaïr's library was the same. Everything else in this story is different."

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Part of the reason for reviving this concept, which already existed within Ubisoft's stable, was expediency. The firm wanted a new *Assassin's Creed* game to launch in 2011. The next great leap forward—*Assassin's Creed III*—was still a year away from being complete, so they had to fill the gap somehow.

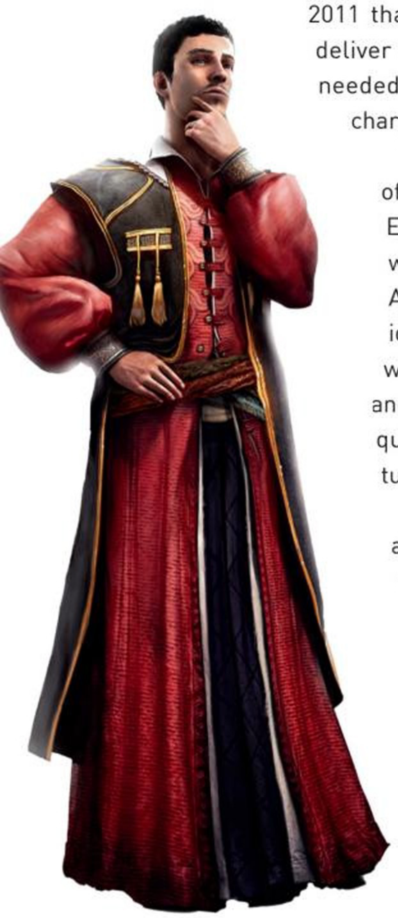
"We decided to extend and finish Ezio's story in-game by developing *Revelations*," Guesdon says. "The plan was to do so very fast because, once again, we had less than a year with a new team. We needed to reuse material and be smart, so we took the skeleton of *The Lost Legacy* and enriched it."

Two months later, McDevitt started writing this final chapter in Ezio's life. The project was initially a small expansion, but this soon changed.

"It was actually going to be about forty percent story and sixty percent multiplayer mode," McDevitt remembers. "But the multiplayer team in Annecy said at the start of 2011 that they couldn't deliver everything they had promised. So, we needed to extend the story aspect to justify charging full price.

"We really quickly came up with the idea of playing Altaïr for some bits, given that Ezio is already following in his footsteps. It was like a whirlwind. Between January and April, every single day there was a new idea. By April or May, we had written the whole script and started recording in May and June. Everything was mo-capped really quickly. It all happened in a rush, but it turned out great."

> "WE DECIDED TO EXTEND AND FINISH EZIO'S STORY IN-GAME BY DEVELOPING *REVELATIONS*. THE PLAN WAS TO DO SO VERY FAST BECAUSE, ONCE AGAIN, WE HAD LESS THAN A YEAR WITH A NEW TEAM."



McDevitt was able to come at the story of *Assassin's Creed Revelations* with a unique perspective. Not only had he worked on two spinoffs in the franchise and one canceled project, but he was also a fan of the series.

"*Brotherhood* was a very good sequel," he enthuses. "It was made very quickly with strong foundations and it built on not just the assassin fantasy but also the story of a beloved character. When I got to write an older Ezio, I was writing from the position of both a fan as well as a guy who had written for the universe. That helped a lot in writing *Revelations*.

"As a fan, I was able to approach it and point out areas where I thought they could squeeze more drama out of this character. Yet as someone who's an experienced writer, I also comprehended the Assassin-Templar War. I understood what the team wanted to go for in terms of bringing forth the history and the secret underlying conspiracy. So, it was really a great moment."

As always, *Revelations* was able to bring more gameplay innovations to the fore, including those that impacted how Ezio navigated around the world.

"It was hard to bring new features to the game, but the team still managed to pull it off," Guesdon says. "We introduced the bomb system as well as the hookblade. That made navigation much quicker. Everyone did their job really well; I was really impressed by what they achieved."

Graziani adds, "The hook was super interesting. It added new ingredients to parkour, but also changed how combat worked. It started to seem that we were just throwing in everything but the kitchen sink."

By this point, the team members were experts in the Anvil engine. Many members had been working with this tech since its inception with the original *Assassin's Creed* and—coupled with their expertise in the game consoles of the time—could get every last drop of performance out of it.

"The technical accomplishments in *Revelations* in terms of the rendering of the characters and the amount of detail that they had were massive," Graziani explains. "The developers had had tons and tons of time to get comfortable with the engine, with the way it interacts with the machine. To me, *Revelations* is absolutely gorgeous."

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PAINTING A SCENE

Raphaël Lacoste, who had worked on the original *Assassin's Creed*, made his return to Ubisoft in 2010 and was made the art director on *Revelations*. In this role, he was instrumental in re-creating the Turkish capital of Constantinople.

"That was one of the best reasons to come back to Ubisoft," Lacoste laughs. "This city has so many different landmarks and the terrain is so interesting. There're seven hills with different mosques and castles, but it's also a peninsula, so you have water all around the city with beautiful points of view. That was really fascinating to bring to life; all these different places and districts were really cool to animate. We did two scouting trips there. The first was for the sounds, sights, and textures. Then we came back just to take references for the textures. We took the actual tiles of the different walls, and that was very interesting too."

Though the team went to great efforts to re-create parts of Constantinople, Lacoste's view on this process is that it shouldn't be a one-to-one simulation of the city. Though many landmarks, such as the Hagia Sophia and Galata Tower, were built within *Revelations*, the art director's perspective was about giving the space the correct feeling.

"Bringing Constantinople to life really stands out to me," he says. "Those scouting trips helped us learn how to fill the light of the city, how to add immersion through sound, how to bring in the composition. It was truly fascinating. We tried to get the most information we could from the actual locations, but we didn't want to do something that was literal. Instead we wanted to portray the emotion and the soul of the place. We aimed to bring the city alive for the player, so we had to take the time to digest everything in order for us to convey the feel of it, but it wasn't a literal re-creation or a documentary. It was about making this kind of dream and conveying the essence of a place."

In contrast to the cities of the first *Assassin's Creed*—where time was static—*Revelations* was to feature a day-night cycle. In other words, the time of day would naturally change over the course of gameplay.

"Animating Constantinople was super interesting because we wanted every single hour of the day to be like an intense painting," Lacoste remembers. "That was a new challenge. Constantinople had multiple phases, multiple moods, and the immersion was really

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stimulating as well because you could play sequences during nighttime. It felt a bit like *Arabian Nights* with the cyan-blue sky and candles in the windows. If you play at sunset, it's very impressive with all the fog and mist that's lit by sunlight. Every single moment in the day brought different kinds of immersions and emotions. That was pretty new for us."

Though he was primarily hired to work on *Assassin's Creed III*, *Revelations* was also the first entry in the franchise to benefit from Ubisoft's in-house historian, Maxime Durand.

"My role was to try to make sure that I give the development team as much information as possible," he explains. "That way, I could inspire them to get into something that's closer to real history. That was really the big challenge."

Setting the game in Constantinople gave the team a chance to depict a rather unique period in history. When most people think of the Roman Empire, they think of the western portion, but Roman rule stretched far into the East as well.

"From a Western perspective, we always think of Rome as the Roman Empire," Durand says. "We think of Rome as this empire that fell and was dislocated. But it continued in the East until the Ottomans took it over.

"Many kingdoms tried to get the Byzantines out. But actually, it was the Ottomans who succeeded in taking over Constantinople, which at the time was one of the most magnificent cities in the world. So that's definitely something interesting I learned from that period. I only knew Suleiman by name before starting my research. His epithet, 'the Magnificent,' is a reflection of his importance in the Ottoman history."

He continues, "Researching for *Revelations* was a real challenge simply because it was hard to find much information about that part of the world that was in English or Western languages."

In addition to re-creating the Turkish capital—and center of the Byzantine Empire—the narrative team went to great pains to properly re-create the Ottoman Empire in *Revelations*. This, in many ways, was a very different world to that of the Italian Renaissance.

"I felt an enormous amount of pressure to represent a culture that I didn't know much about," McDevitt says. "I had never read up on the Ottomans, who were the great Islamic empire that existed from the late Middle Ages to the beginning of the twentieth century. I did what I thought was a tremendous amount of reading back then. I do even more now. It felt like a tremendous honor but also a tremendous responsibility. I took it very seriously and I worked really hard."

Revelations' Constantinople setting was one reason why the game was nearly named *Crossroads*, given that the city was the meeting point of several religions and civilizations. In the end, however, the team went with *Revelations*, something which made little sense to McDevitt.

"We thought that it would be called *Crossroads*, but that just wasn't sexy enough, apparently," he laughs. "Then *Revelations* was suggested and I actually fought against it. I didn't know what it meant because nothing is truly revealed. I thought it was going to be very disappointing.

"The game had a great ending, but the title misled people into thinking something was going to be revealed."

Following in the footsteps of *Brotherhood*, multiplayer mode made a return for *Assassin's Creed Revelations*.

With *Brotherhood* out in the wild, the Annecy team was able to look at what worked and what could be improved when it came to the *Assassin's Creed* multiplayer feature. The mode had been well received, with a lot of fans spending time within this competitive part of the game. But there were some issues that needed fixing.

"As soon as we started with the multiplayer mode on *Brotherhood*, the community was complaining about roofers," Graziani remembers. "These were players who would stand on the roof and wait before attacking people. We had players complaining about this; the developers felt that these people were playing the game wrong. In the end, we came up with a solution—the developers made it so that throwing knives would knock players off roofs. If you saw someone on a roof, it was obvious that they weren't an NPC; the main thing about multiplayer mode was being able to pretend to be an NPC."

With *Brotherhood*, the multiplayer component was new. There weren't really any expectations, as no one outside of Ubisoft really knew what a competitive *Assassin's Creed* mode would look like.

"With *Revelations*, it was about reproducing the things that worked while also creating and hyping up newer features and settings, all without breaking it. There was a very subtle balancing process regarding the gameplay."

There was a lot of pressure on the Annecy team, though. The studio had been given a mandate to release more maps for *Revelations*' multiplayer mode, but in the end, they were unable to produce everything that they had hoped to.

"We only had five maps at launch," Granjon explains. "Honestly, we didn't have enough time. The entire game was made in nine months. The multiplayer element in *Revelations* was about trying to push the bar when it came to gameplay."

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"WE WERE REALLY TARGETING A HOLLYWOOD LEVEL OF QUALITY WITH THE SOUNDTRACK."

Revelations had another bump in quality when it came to its audio design. Jesper Kyd—who had worked on the music for *Assassin's Creed* since its inception—returned, but Ubisoft also brought in Lorne Balfe, Hans Zimmer's prodigy, to work on the soundtrack.

"Having two composers on a project was quite unique at the time," music supervisor Simon Landry explains. "Lorne did do amazing work for the cutscenes, while Jesper was famous for his work in open-world games. Splitting up the work was a smart way to address those aggressive timelines."

The game's score was also the first to be recorded using a live orchestra.

"We were really targeting a Hollywood level of quality with the soundtrack," Landry explains. "All the cutscenes were produced with a live orchestra toward the end of the project and most of them were integrated at Dolby 5.1 surround sound."

END OF EZIO

Revelations culminates in one of the series' most powerful scenes: Ezio meeting his predecessor, Altaïr, as well as Desmond, his descendant, hundreds of years in the future in the game's present day.

"*Revelations* is all quite a blur, but I clearly remember writing the final scene," McDevitt says. "I felt that it was fairly powerful but worried whether we were going to be able to execute it well. One of the difficulties in those days was that we always recorded the dialogue first, and then we had body doubles come in for motion capture. We would never know how the scene would play out. Nowadays, we capture both dialogue and performance at the same time, so we have a better sense of if a scene's going to be a great take.

"Back then, it was a little bit more up in the air as to whether or not this would come together well. I

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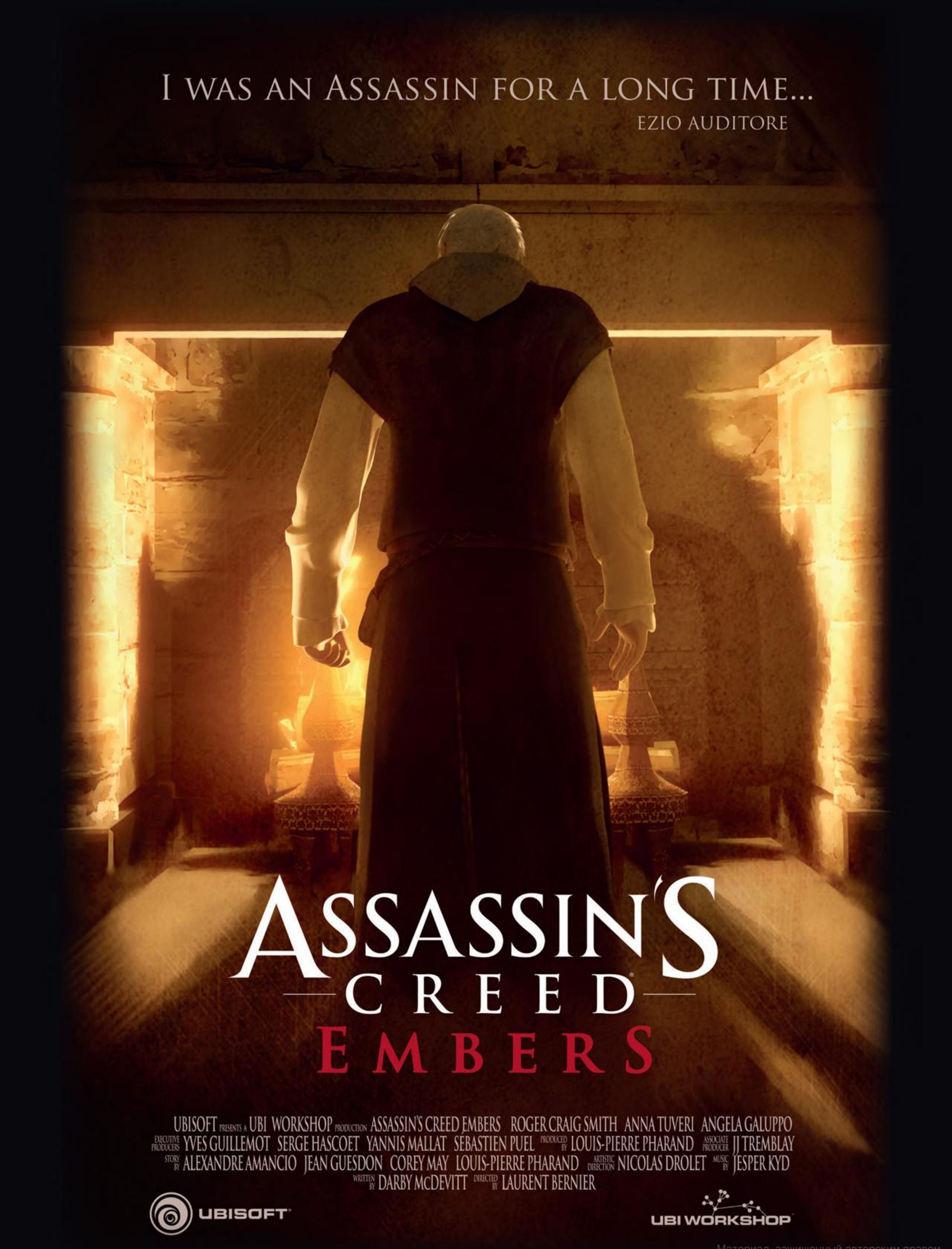

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remember going to LA to record all the dialogue for *Revelations* and *Embers*, which was really bittersweet. It was weird because you're making this game set in the Ottoman Empire about this old Assassin, but in reality, you're sitting in Venice Beach in the summertime in a studio. And you're just hanging out with this actor—Roger Craig Smith—who's been working on the character of Ezio for a few years now. It was really a fun time."

DYING OF THE LIGHT

Though *Assassin's Creed Revelations* was the last game to feature Ezio, he did not die during the course of that title's events. The Ubisoft team wanted to give this beloved character a proper sendoff with a short film called *Embers*.

"It felt like a huge responsibility," McDevitt admits. "We also wanted to have Ezio leave behind his playboy ways, get settled down, and get married. To be honest, I felt a tremendous pressure about closing his story."

Embers had, in many ways, more of a traditional shooting process compared to a video game.

"Because it was a film, it followed a much more traditional trajectory," McDevitt explains.

"You write a script, you say you're happy with that script, you start animating things or recording dialogue, and then you polish it. Games are not like that. You don't write a script first and then make it. It's like trying to build a film camera while you're shooting the movie. *Revelations* was pretty short, so I was able to keep the whole script in my head and make revisions as needed. The script for *Embers* was a little bit longer."

With *Embers*, the Ubisoft transmedia team also wanted to test whether or not it could reuse assets created for its video games in other mediums, such as film.

"We wanted to see if it was possible to recycle the world that had been created," Azaïzia explains. "We applied a cel-shading filter and used some of the locations from our games as backdrops in *Embers*. Every single background came straight from a game. Sadly, it never worked. We had the whole pipeline up and running, but the results of the test weren't really conclusive."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were some extra scenes which didn't make the cut in *Embers*.

"There were originally some scenes with Machiavelli at the beginning where he's actually reading excerpts from one of his plays," McDevitt says. "The real Machiavelli became something of a playwright at the end of his life, so he was coming to read some pages of his new play to Ezio. Meanwhile Ezio wanted him to drink some of his new wine, that year's vintage. That scene was cut because the team didn't have enough time to make a full Machiavelli character. We really had to keep it simple, so we did Sofia, Ezio, Shao Jun, and Flavia, and then a few bad guys. We didn't have enough budget to make a Machiavelli, and we needed to keep it under twenty-five minutes or so.

"There was also a scene where Ezio says goodbye to Machiavelli and they talk about Leonardo da Vinci passing away a couple of years before. And Ezio says, 'I was actually with him when he passed away,' and Machiavelli replies, 'I hope he's in a better place.' You know, that kind of thing. We wanted to bring some closure, but sadly that was cut and it instead jumped into Ezio writing his letters. I wish we could have seen Machiavelli and had a reference to Leonardo, but we couldn't."

The reason that the end of Ezio's life was not shown within *Revelations* is due to a subtle bit of *Assassin's Creed* lore.

"The way genetic memory was supposed to work in the Animus was that as soon as anyone had a descendant—as soon as they have kids—when you go back into the Animus you would be reliving their child's memory. You wouldn't be able to go back into your ancestor's memory," Azaïzia says.

"By the time *Embers* takes place, Ezio has had multiple kids. There's no way we could, within the Animus, and within our constraint of having to play Desmond, show how Ezio would die. It had to be from an external standpoint."

By the time of his death, Ezio had starred in three of his own mainline *Assassin's Creed* games, as well as one spinoff. He had become one of the most iconic characters in video games at the time, second only to long-standing icons like *Halo*'s Master Chief.

With the Ezio Trilogy, the *Assassin's Creed* franchise went from being the new kid on the block to one of the best-selling series in the medium, selling millions of copies each and every year. It had taken Ubisoft from a medium player to one of the biggest game companies in the world.

There was no stopping the *Assassin's Creed* behemoth. Having explored the Crusades, the Italian Renaissance, and the Ottoman Empire, it was time for a different kind of game entirely as the franchise moved across the Atlantic to another foundational moment in history.

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A CHANGE OF CREED

After *Brotherhood*, Ubisoft decided to change the *Assassin's Creed* logo. This crest, present in the first two titles, was asymmetrical, with one side of the crest being thinner than the other.

The team decided to make it symmetrical, something that was partly inspired by Ubisoft's growing ambitions for the *Assassin's Creed* brand.

"We had what had become an iconic crest, which could be adapted to whatever context," Guesdon says. "This was at a time where we were starting to develop the transmedia strategy. I was working on a Facebook project, and the first comic book—*The Fall*, about the Russian Revolution—was also in the works. There was clearly this need to send a signal, every time, that this was an *Assassin's Creed* product."

From this point on, the team also played more with the crest, making it fit with a project's time frame and theme.

"Adapting the logo based on the context came out quite naturally," Guesdon says. "We could do so much with that."

ASYMMETRICAL

SYMMETRICAL

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ROGER CRAIG SMITH

For a time, Ezio Auditore da Firenze was one of video games' most iconic characters, and this was in no small part due to the talent of voice actor Roger Craig Smith.

As with any role, his time with *Assassin's Creed* started with a simple audition. When he was told he was going to voice an Italian, Smith decided to channel the accent of Grand Prix motorcycle champion Valentino Rossi, with precise enunciation of every syllable and consonant.

"I told Ubisoft I'd try my best, but Italian wasn't necessarily my strong suit," Smith remembers. "They told me that for the purposes of this role, they were going to go for more of a Spanish accent, like Antonio Banderas."

Indeed, a lot of the work that Smith put into the role was working with the developers to figure out exactly how Ezio should sound. After all, we don't actually know how people spoke during the Italian Renaissance.

"We were always working on the writing and trying to find that fine blend of accents," Smith says. "I call it Italian Spanglish—it's Italian, Spanish, and English all blended together to make it more palatable to the Western ear."

Part of the reason why Smith auditioned—and why he landed the role—was his ability to do a variety of age ranges. After all, the plan was to try to tell Ezio's story from being a young womanizer all the way through to becoming a master Assassin.

"There definitely was the sense that this character was going through an evolution," Smith says. "He is going from being a carefree playboy, sitting on the roof with his brother and talking about the good life they lead, through the reality of losing his family. He then gains all this anger, has to learn to control it, and then gains the understanding that he is part of something much bigger than himself. All of that was in the writing."

From the start, Smith says he knew that *Assassin's Creed II* was special. It was more ambitious than many video games at the time.

"There was a lot of meat on this bone for me to chew on from a performance standpoint, and that was rare at the time," he explains. "It was a really cool thing to be a part of. It was so different to screaming out, 'I need ammo' or 'Reloading' or 'Machine gun on the hill.' A lot of the games back then had the same war stuff over and over again. Then all of a sudden, here was this game and these moments of familial love, friendship and camaraderie, trust, betrayal, and corruption."

But what moment stands out the most to Smith from his time voicing Ezio?

"It has to be the moment where Ezio does an assassination in a town square and he declares to everybody that the Auditore are not dead," Smith says. "'I'm still here. Me. Ezio. Ezio Auditore.'

"I think we did two takes of that moment. I remember saying that I was really going to yell and scream the line out. To me, that is the moment where he's becoming more capable. He's essentially tasted blood and is calling out the people who caused so much tragedy for his family. He's letting them know that his sole purpose is to come for them.

"Now this kind of writing has become much more commonplace. Narrative is so important in gaming, but I just remember thinking this was so much fun."

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CHAPTER THREE

THE KENWAY DYNASTY

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ASSASSIN'S CREED III

Back when *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood* was still in production, Ubisoft Montréal started work on what was to be the next generation of *Assassin's Creed* games.

This was going to be a new and super-ambitious entry in the series, powered by a new iteration of Ubisoft's Anvil engine, dubbed AnvilNext. Furthermore, it was going to be set during the Revolutionary War in the United States. Not only was this a notable and turbulent period of time—perfect for the kinds of stories the developers wanted to tell in *Assassin's Creed*—but the setting was partly chosen to appeal to a broader audience. Compared to *Assassin's Creed II*, where the brand was still somewhat novel, the third numbered entry was going to be an absolute blockbuster.

"The American Revolution setting was definitely a way for us to perform even better in the United States," says *Assassin's Creed* brand director Etienne Allonier.

"When we pitched *Assassin's Creed II* to our American colleagues for the first time, a lot of them weren't all that enthusiastic about it. They weren't that familiar with the Italian Renaissance. But with the American Revolution, we got an immediate seal of approval. Everyone wanted us to go bigger on this one."

He continues, "The American Revolution was a bit more mainstream than the Italian Renaissance."

As always, the protagonist of an *Assassin's Creed* game had to match with the historical setting. As this game would take place during the Revolutionary War, the team was really keen to have a character who sat between the warring factions of the British and Americans. Ultimately, they landed on a Native American character.

"When I joined, Patrice had this idea of a much more personal story for *Assassin's Creed III*," says Alex Hutchinson, creative director on *Assassin's Creed III*.

"Very early on, he was talking about how he wanted to have Québec in the game. It was going to be the story of North America and of family. The more I thought about it, the more it became obvious that having a Native American protagonist made sense. That was incredibly exciting for us to have someone who could stand outside

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of the sort of cliché positions of the audience. He wasn't going to be aligned with the redcoats and he wasn't going to be aligned with the patriots. He could be a character who spoke for the player and offered an external perspective, which was really exciting."

When historian Maxime Durand joined the project, it wasn't clear when exactly during the American Revolution the game would be set. What was set in stone was that *Assassin's Creed III*'s protagonist was going to be Native American. Ubisoft just wasn't sure which tribe it was going to focus on.

"So, we looked at all the different tribes and what happened to them," Durand says. "We examined what involvement and role they played within the American Revolution, if any. We ended up landing on the Kanien'kehá:ka—also known as the Mohawks—because they were the most relevant ones for the game's needs. They were part of a confederation located in upstate New York that had dissolved because of the American Revolution and the Seven Years' War, which happened shortly before the revolution.

"They traditionally sided with the English colonies against the French ones. The internal conflicts of the American Revolution also impacted the Native American confederations."

Thus, Ratonhnhaké:ton—also known as Connor[1]—was created. In fact, the Ubisoft team needed to work with the Mohawk Nation in order for him to be given his name.

"In the Mohawk tradition, you cannot pick your name," Azaïzia explains. "You have to ask for the council to give you a name and that name is unique. The name Ratonhnhaké:ton was given to us by the Mohawk Council, and it's an entirely unique name. It actually means 'the one who scratches at life.'"

Creating a character that was going to follow in the footsteps of Ezio was a huge task. By the time his trilogy closed with *Revelations*, he was one of video games' most recognizable characters.

"Those were some really big shoes to fill," Azaïzia laughs. "Coming up with a new protagonist after Ezio was almost an impossible mission. The funny thing is at the time I remember vividly when we were announcing new games people were like, 'Oh, come on. Not Ezio again.' A lot of people were fed up with him and wanted something new. But because players spent a lifetime with him and saw him evolve, change, and grow old, replacing him was a Herculean task.

"The idea was that the character has to be reflective of their time period. They have to be a symbol of what's happening in the story, and therefore, when we worked on Connor, the idea was that we would showcase the struggle between father and son. The issue that Desmond has with his father is also reflected in the issue that Connor has with his own father."

Connor also served to solidify the gameplay pillars of *Assassin's Creed III*.

"We wanted to reflect the Native American influence in Connor's fighting style—that's why Connor has a knife and a tomahawk," Laferrière says. "He's able to fight up close and personal. We also thought he'd be at ease in a nature setting, and probably a good hunter, so we introduced the bow. Finally, we thought it'd be really cool to offer different viewpoints to players, so Connor is super agile and able to climb trees easily."

> "IN THE MOHAWK TRADITION, YOU CANNOT PICK YOUR NAME. YOU HAVE TO ASK FOR THE COUNCIL TO GIVE YOU A NAME AND THAT NAME IS UNIQUE."

In order to give an authentic portrayal of Connor, the team turned to Native American voice actors to give life to the character.

"A portion of it is actually in Mohawk," Baccard says. "It's something that I think made the team really proud. We had Mohawk actors come in to record. The idea was to be as authentic as possible."

After years of a flamboyant character like Ezio, opinion within the *Assassin's Creed* audience was somewhat divided when it came to Connor.

"Some people loved him," Azaïzia says. "But others had an issue with him because they felt he was a bit too dark, a bit too driven."

LIVING HISTORY

During the development of *Assassin's Creed III*, Maxime Durand joined the Ubisoft staff full time as the in-house historian. He was aided in his work for this project by outside consultants. While Durand had worked on *Revelations*, this was the project he was hired for.

"It was never stated that it was going to be the most accurate game. However, because they hired me to be

[1] Continuing in the franchise's naming tradition, Connor means "hunter."

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on the team as an in-house historian, I think they wanted to do justice to the American Revolution time period," Durand explains. "That didn't necessarily mean glorifying it, but rather treating it with respect. It's most definitely the game that fits closest to the real historical track."

Laferrière adds, "From a historical perspective, the American Revolution is probably one of the richest, but also one of the toughest, time periods to set a game in. One of your biggest markets, the US, has been learning about this era since they started school. It's such a pivotal moment of history, and it's so heavily documented that you cannot really steer away from or invent anything. It's very, very precise."

Whereas in the Ezio Trilogy, the Ubisoft Montréal team had started to bring in real characters for our protagonist to interact with—such as Leonardo da Vinci—*Assassin's Creed III* went much harder on the history of the period. In fact, Connor was present for many of the pivotal events of the American Revolution.

"We actively witness and participate in the Boston Tea Party in Boston Harbor in the game. We tried to explain why this event was important," Durand says.

"Players can also witness the famous ride made by Paul Revere as well as the burning of the city of New York."

But in addition to the famous events of the time period, Durand's expertise allowed the studio to re-create aspects of the era that were not as well known.

"I don't think people can easily imagine what North America looked like in the eighteenth century," he says. "One of the greatest opportunities was to be able to immerse players in a believable visual rendering of the northern colonies during that time period. Most of the landmarks have disappeared.

"If we just look at the city of New York, there are only one or two buildings from the time era that are still standing. The city has changed quite a bit except for its layout."

Durand was also vital in helping unearth the Native American story of the time period. The communities worked hand in hand with Ubisoft through a respectful, collaborative process.

"The American Revolution is very well documented from the American and British perspective," Bergeron says. "From a mission design director's or writer's point of view, that information was pretty easy to come by. The thing that was really hard for us to find was the Native American perspective. That viewpoint is not as well documented because, in general, the Native American population has been spurned in the past, both in how they're treated and how they're portrayed. As a result, they tend to be a bit more reserved when it comes to sharing that type of

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information. From the outset, it was a little harder to get that perspective. But having Maxime was good in that sense because he was able to find the right consultants for us to talk to and get the information from."

For the development team, going into the history of a setting wasn't limited to just using the services of the in-house historian.

"The team was developing the game in the basement of the studio," Etienne Allonier says. "I remember entering the basement and there were old costumes from the time period everywhere. I think that was the first time that the group was so immersed in the setting, maybe because it was slightly easier to find these items compared to the Renaissance. It was the first time where I felt that the team was living in the period; there were tomahawks and weapons from the American Revolution displayed in the studio."

In fact, the crew generally think that they followed the events of the American Revolution too closely. They have even given this phenomenon its own name.

"It's the Forrest Gump effect," Durand laughs. "After *Assassin's Creed III*, we tried to stay away from being too close to the real historical track. *Assassin's Creed III* offered a truthful re-creation of the American Revolution's key events and impacts, such as the displacement of Native American populations and the complexity of its geopolitics.

"But staying too close to actual events resulted in fewer opportunities for level design, because everything you did, no matter what you did, would always have to coincide with what happened in the American Revolution. The personal motivations of the Templars and the Assassins had to match with those of the real historical characters and the real events."

The targets that Connor was hunting down were real people whose deaths are documented and definitive; historical records list where they died and when. As always, the team had to weave its *Assassin's Creed* revisionist history into factual events.

"The game's main bad guy, Lee, died in a pub by himself," Laferrière says. "So how do you craft an interesting finale with a villain who will ultimately die in a pub? Obviously, you end up fighting and poisoning him, so he dies in the pub as planned. But in our telling of it, there's an epic chase that happened first. It was a very fun but challenging production because of that."

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America at the time of the revolution presented something of a challenge for the development team, because it wasn't very metropolitan compared to, say, Renaissance Italy.

"The revolutionary setting in America is a pretty dull place for most traditional video games," Hutchinson says. "There were no tall buildings and no really big cities. The architecture was pretty mediocre. It was an amazing point in history, but it wasn't necessarily a fun setting. Still, we liked the idea of that challenge."

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Up until now, *Assassin's Creed* games had been very urbancentric. There were areas outside of cities that the player could explore, but these weren't very fleshed out. In fact, with prior *Assassin's Creed* games, the development had a rule that the protagonist could interact with human architecture, but not organic structures in the natural world.

By contrast, the team making *Assassin's Creed III* labored to create an actual living world. This was done out of necessity given the time period the game was set in.

"The cities at that time couldn't have supported the density of experience and the missions that we wanted to put together," Hutchinson explains. "America at the time was the water and the land as well as the cities. To be honest with the setting, we had to expand it to include those things."

He continues, "There were still some beautiful buildings, but there weren't too many landmarks. We realized that maybe one way to tackle that problem was to engage with the natural world. We did free running in trees and uneven surfaces. That felt like the opportunity for us, instead of looking at how we could take the *Assassin's Creed* formula verbatim from an urban setting to what counted as an urban setting in America.

"What opportunities existed? What did the setting give us? What it gave us was trees, mountains, and cliffs, as well as some cities. We looked at it as more of an opportunity rather than trying to squish the formula into colonial America."

This came with its fair share of challenges, however. Building a city is tough, but at least it's somewhat

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logical. The wilderness, with flora and fauna, is not only hard to make, but also difficult to make feel organic.

"It was a lot of work," Hutchinson laughs. "We had to challenge the navigation team to take on areas that they hadn't before. The beauty of cities and buildings is that they're quite rigidly constructed; they have rules and patterns that we could follow, which helped with the engineering. By contrast, the natural world is made up of much more arbitrary shapes, with an array of angles, branches, and all these things."

Bergeron adds, "We spent a lot of time asking, What does a gameplay forest mean for the brand? How do you build a tree that is fun to navigate, but doesn't look like a coat rack? It still needs to resemble an organic and natural tree—something that grew with the laws of nature and not something orchestrated by the laws of man. We eventually found some formulas, but never enough that we could propagate them across the entire world, sadly."

As with the original *Assassin's Creed*—and *The Sands of Time* before it—the team once again had to contend with the idea of readability. They had to come up with a method of telling players what they could and couldn't interact with.

"Now we can make the player interact with anything, but it doesn't mean that they understand that they should interact with things or that they can see those paths," Bergeron explains. "The foundation of the brand was *Prince of Persia* and games that had an orchestrated path where the players can see where to go and reverse engineer a plan on how to navigate it. All of that goes out the window when you're talking about organic architecture. So, it took us a while to wrap our heads around that, and eventually we found our formula on how to do that."

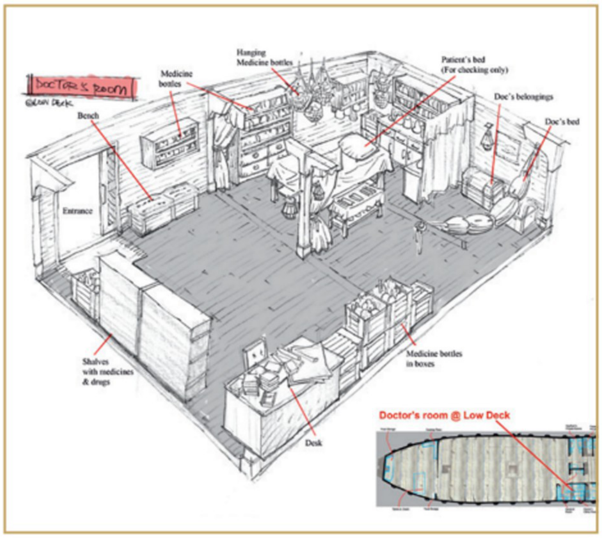
The team had to spend a lot of time figuring out how to re-create parts of the world that felt organic; they also had to work out how to have Connor move through these spaces in a natural way.

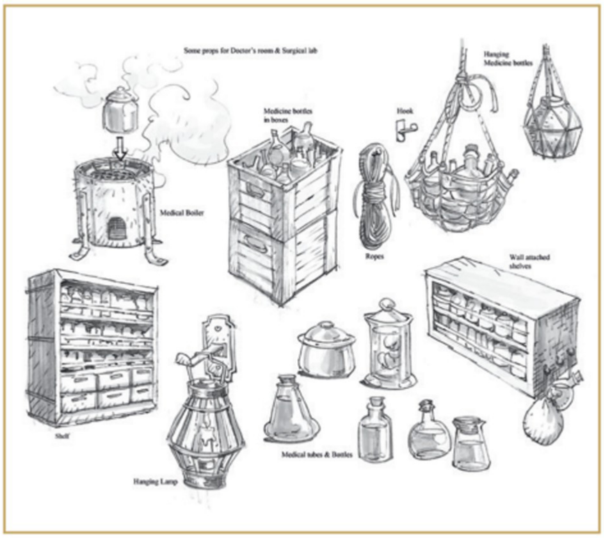
"It was such a huge technical change when it came to the way the character moved around the world," Puel says. "At the time, this was based on metrics—this system called rational level design—all based on very precise metrics. When you go into the world outside of cities, it's much, much harder to do that because things have to be very organic. And there are no metrics between trees to let the game know if the player can jump from branch to branch. But we had to re-create that new world. It was a huge technical change. There was a vast ambition for this game where we had three years of development. We had an amazing team. And we took a very, very big bite with this one."

Not only was building an organic world that actually felt natural challenging, but the team also needed to fill this space.

"Trying to find the density of experience that made being in that world fun was also challenging," Hutchinson says. "Especially in a game like *Assassin's Creed* where you're predominantly on foot. People move at around six meters a second at most. The natural world in America is vast. So we had the horse, and we had fast travel as well. But making sure that there was enough to see and do was a challenge, so we introduced hunting. Plus we introduced naval combat to support the fantasy of life on the sea. I'm just really proud of the huge volume of new stuff that we jammed into *Assassin's Creed III*."

Bergeron adds, "It's mainly a challenge on pure level design aspects. When you're talking about world design





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and finding ways to occupy the player, it's not that hard on the mission design side. We just had to find stories that we wanted to tell in this environment. Then we'd do some location scouting and find the right environment for the stories. For instance, we knew that we had to do Revere's ride at some point. We had an idea of how that was going to go down.

"From there, we talked with the world designers and told them what we needed. We had to have a number of mountain villages, spread out in a certain way, so that there were travel moments during which Paul Revere and Connor could talk. On the mission design side, that was easy enough. It was the responsibility of the world design side to strike the perfect balance of having enough interactions, but not so many interactions that it doesn't feel like a forest anymore.

"There's a density that is expected when it comes to a city, as opposed to farmland or the boonies, where there's a scarcity or sparsity in the way that it's laid out that is expected."

While the world was much more sprawling and far less urban, on the design side of things, the team still approached design with cities in mind. That was something that would change later in the franchise, but at the time they had to fill the wilderness.

"We had to ask ourselves what made sense to have in the forest, considering what we had at the time," Bergeron says.

"We focused on activities such as hunting, as well as having patrols going through the forest. We also had cargo deliveries, which meant there were carts that could be ambushed. There were some forts, too. Frontier forts looked more like a traditional log cabin rather than a traditional stone or brick fort. But it still needed to feel as if you were out in the forest."

While Montréal led work on *Assassin's Creed III*, other studios were brought in to help out on various aspects of the game. Québec, for example, worked on the Homestead, a feature that continued what *Assassin's Creed II* started—having a home for the game's protagonist.

"One of the things that I wanted to accomplish in *Assassin's Creed III* through the Homestead was to flesh out our characters and give them more screen time," says Marc-Alexis Côté, who was the game director for Ubisoft Québec.

"They weren't just about killing people. They had a life as well. The Homestead was there to really flesh out the pitch and the personality of Connor. What I found interesting in retrospect is that people who played the Homestead had a very, very different appreciation of *Assassin's Creed III* and of Connor, compared with people who just ignored this part of the game."

LET IT SNOW

Given that the Canadian studio was creating an open-world game on the brand-new iteration of its game engine, AnvilNext, it made sense to introduce weather into the world of *Assassin's Creed*. Specifically, the developers decided to implement snow. Featuring weather, especially snow, had become popular within AAA games at the time. But in most cases, these were linear titles and not sprawling open worlds.

"It's much easier to do things in a scripted or linear level than it is in an open world," Hutchinson says. "The reason we wanted to include the snow is because we live in Québec; it gets down to around –35°C. It felt very disingenuous to make a game about North America and not point out that it gets pretty cold here. I felt like we had to be true to our setting."

Azaïzia adds, "In the very first presentation that Hutchinson and the team gave about *Assassin's Creed III*, they said, 'We're in Montréal. If there's one thing we know, it's snow.' This was a feature we needed in our game. They had worked so hard to make this really believable, working snow. It was a huge leap forward in terms of animation and rendering techniques."

Weather mechanics, such as snow, weren't present just to show off the technical proficiency of the development team or to highlight just how cold North America can be.

"We wanted weather, but we also wanted it to mean something in gameplay," Bergeron says. "Snow would slow you down when you walked through it, which gave the player an incentive to use the branches when they were in the forest so as not to be slowed down. You also leave tracks in the snow, which can then be a distraction for enemies, who would follow your footprints in the snow to try and find you. We figured that something like blizzards and fog would reduce the ability of both sides to detect each other."

By this point, the Ubisoft teams in Montréal and Singapore had been collaborating on *Assassin's Creed* for quite some time. With the third numbered entry in the series, the two worked closer together, in part thanks to a shared passion of franchise executive producer Sébastien Puel and Singapore managing director Olivier de Rotalier.

"They were both into ships," Luhe laughs. "And they asked whether the idea of ship and naval gameplay was

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something that could fit in the brand. They asked if we could make a pirate game, and asked us to explore the concept a bit."

So, the Singapore team did just that. A number of coders who had been working on *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Phantoms* had recently become available, so they headed over to Montréal for four to six weeks in order to prototype what naval gameplay could look like.

"They spent some time creating a prototype of what a naval battlefield could feel like," Luhe says. "It was very rough, graphically speaking, but the gameplay loop was there. People tried it and said it was really cool and could be super interesting."

The American Revolution setting meant that introducing naval gameplay was a nice fit. This period had a number of sea conflicts, such as the Battle of the Chesapeake. But as was the case with a lot of new features that were to be introduced into *Assassin's Creed*—outside of the core gameplay loop—naval gameplay was designed to be "highly cuttable."

"*Assassin's Creed III* could easily have shipped without the naval missions and still have been a very large and compelling experience," Luhe admits. "I think the pressure was slightly reduced. It didn't have to be part of that game, but the team knew they had something interesting."

While the *Assassin's Creed* franchise had introduced new forms of gameplay over its history, at the time naval was definitely the biggest leap from the core tenets of the franchise. Making this fit within the series was a tricky thing to get right.

"It was extremely difficult because we tried to look at what the pillars of the brand are," Luhe explains. "It's stealth, it's exploration, it's about reaching high points. Those things are really hard to do. We realized that the Assassin needs to be at the heart of everything. The camera angle we used for naval gameplay, for example, was the subject of a lot of discussion. Did we want to go with a top-down view like *Sid Meier's Pirates!*, which would have been good for a strategic battle? Or did we want to stay on the Assassin's shoulder to be true to the brand? Of course, we went for the latter. That in itself was a big decision and guided a lot of the other decisions. The game is action based, so it makes sense that

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you're at the wheel. You are shouting orders to your crew to shoot cannons. Let's start with that; we can have two sides shooting cannons at each other. And wind plays a factor in that, of course.

"It was so different from what we had built before."

As with anything involving new tech, the tools required to actually make the content were ready quite late in development. But when they started playtesting, Ubisoft Singapore knew they were onto something.

"At the time, no mission had ever received such a high rating in the franchise's history as the first naval missions we tested," Luhe says. "The playtest score was out of this world. It was actually a really boring mission, in a way. It was more or less a tutorial showing players how to shoot, how to navigate. But because it was the first time people were doing it, it looked amazing and it felt great. It wasn't very deep or rich as a mission on its own, compared to the rest. However, because it was the first time players had ever experienced something like that in the brand, the ratings were just really good.

"It was funny. Prior to this test, our game director said the naval mission was boring and that we needed to improve it. Then the playtest results came back—literally five out of five—and the game director said, 'Ah, it's fine, we can leave it.' Obviously the naval component was a great success and we already knew based on playtest results that it was something that had hooked players."

The fact that, in-game, the naval missions were separate from the open world gave the Singapore team a great deal of freedom. They could go bigger and better and more impressive with those segments.

"We didn't have to worry about the open-world constraints," Luhe says. "We could have beautiful visual effects and audio."

Part of this was having a dynamic and interesting ocean. It wasn't enough to just have water; the sea needed to be a beast that could change on a whim, an element which played an active role in naval engagements.

"You often build mandates based on the people you have and one of the experts we had was technical director George Torres," Luhe explains. "He built the ocean simulation and that unlocked so much more. Just having that and having ships floating on it created such a dynamic game space. Depending on the angle of the waves, your cannons were going to either shoot way up into the sky or hit the water. It was all part of the ocean simulation and it would change again completely.

"It was a great tool for designers to play with because you can start with calm weather and then have a storm

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come in and change the experience entirely. As a level designer, you didn't have to do much. You could just tell the player to sail through a particular strait, and then have a storm come in that raised the wind from Beaufort 2 to Beaufort 7."

For *Assassin's Creed III*, Ubisoft's Annecy studio once again delivered the multiplayer experience. Dubbed Wolfpack, this was a cooperative mode that saw four players teaming up to fight against waves of enemies. As with many aspects of the now-annual *Assassin's Creed* series, this was something that the crew had tried to implement with *Revelations*, but which they hadn't been able to get right.

"We wanted to do a co-op experience for *Revelations*," Granjon explains. "We worked on a game mode called Battle for Rhodes, which would have been a four-player cooperative mode that felt like a small campaign. We managed to get it working, but had some doubts about how well it would perform. We spent about three months on this, but stopped because it was just too complicated. There were also concerns about performance and how big the world was, how NPCs were managed, and so on. So, we ceased working on it."

> "WE WANTED TO DO A CO-OP EXPERIENCE FOR *REVELATIONS*... WHICH WOULD HAVE BEEN A FOUR-PLAYER COOPERATIVE MODE THAT FELT LIKE A SMALL CAMPAIGN."

But in true *Assassin's Creed* fashion, what the team couldn't fully deliver in one year was absolutely attainable in the next. Deciding to go for co-op in *Assassin's Creed III* was partly to offer a middle ground for an audience that was primarily playing these games to experience a single-player narrative.

"We wanted to have this co-op version of the game," Granjon explains. "At the time I was a content director, and we pushed the game director really hard to include the co-op mode, because we felt that it was something that would attract more solo players to the game. The issue was that, on the one hand, we were selling a solo experience to an audience that loves solo narrative experiences. On the other hand, we were also selling a very fast-paced, stressful multiplayer game to that same audience. The co-op feature was a way to try to make them more comfortable with an online game. We also felt that co-op modes were a strong proposal and were super fun to play."

Given how much work had gone into souping up the Anvil game engine for *Assassin's Creed* multiplayer, the Annecy team was still using this tech to power the co-op portion of the game for *Assassin's Creed III*. The main game had used the new and improved AnvilNext tech, but the Annecy studio was able to squeeze everything they could out of the engine.

"At the start of development, we were told that we'd probably look outdated visually compared to the rest of the game," Granjon laughs. "But when the game was released, some reviewers praised AnvilNext as being beautiful, especially in the multiplayer sections."

This was, partly, because AnvilNext was having to manage aspects like lighting across a huge world, while the multiplayer portions of the game were far more confined.

The team had also started to make the multiplayer mode in *Assassin's Creed III* closer to the single-player portions. This included the fake advertisements with cutscenes to frame what was taking place within this part of the game.

"We came up with this idea that the multiplayer would be this disc literally made by Abstergo that shipped with the game," Yohalem explains. "I ran with that: this idea that this is a product that's shipped by them. Coming up with all of the videos for their fake product advertisements was very fun. This was before *Black Mirror*, so it's amusing. That show explored a lot of the same ideas that we had done with *Revelations*' multiplayer mode and the type of products that Abstergo made."

A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

As well as telling the story of the American Revolution and of Connor, *Assassin's Creed III* had some pretty heavy narrative decisions to make when it came to the franchise's modern-day components. The team had to decide whether the present-day protagonist, Desmond, had to go.

"At the brand level, there were some pretty intense discussions with the *Assassin's Creed III* team about the fact that we had to end Desmond's story," Guesdon remembers. "We needed to free the franchise. Desmond was instrumental and very important at the start because he was part of the glue that held together

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different games. He created this feeling of consistency between episodes no matter what time period a title was taking place in. Third Crusade? No problem, it was actually Desmond's story. Then we moved to the Italian Renaissance. That was fine, it was Desmond's story. This was then repeated with the American Revolution."

From the start, the team had wanted *Assassin's Creed* to be a franchise, one which could be the subject of books, graphic novels, and films. While the framing device of Desmond worked nicely at the beginning, it had started to limit what Ubisoft could do with the franchise.

"We were expanding the franchise, bringing new characters to the table," Guesdon says. "We had started to feel constrained. If all the transmedia was referring to and based on Desmond, we would have been limited in the long term."

The *Assassin's Creed* franchise had been building toward a big world-ending event in 2012 since its inception back in 2007. At the start, 2012 felt like a long time in the future.

"Then, all of a sudden, we had reached 2012," Guesdon says. "The solution was really to say that from 2012, the real world had caught up with the modern story with Desmond, Abstergo, and so on. From there, we have merged the two; the present day of the game is our actual present day."

Desmond's sacrifice saved the human race in *Assassin's Creed III* and allowed the franchise to continue for many years to come.

Before launch, hype for the game was at an all-time high. In October 2012, Ubisoft said that it was its most preordered title to date and that the franchise as a whole had shipped 40 million copies. Within a week of release, Ubisoft estimated that *Assassin's Creed III* had sold 3.5 million copies, double that of its predecessor *Revelations*.

To put it lightly, the game was an absolute blockbuster.

As always, Ubisoft wanted to build upon the established mechanics for its next entry in the franchise.

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ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG

It probably won't come as a shock that *Black Flag* emerged because of the quality of naval gameplay in *Assassin's Creed III*. Having seen some of this in production, the Ubisoft marketing team said that it made total sense to create a pirate game.

"Sébastien turned to me and asked me how we fit a pirate game within the *Assassin's Creed* franchise," Guesdon laughs.

This project initially began as a series of expansions for *Assassin's Creed III* led by the Montréal studio. At the time, the Singapore studio was still relatively young and therefore couldn't shoulder an entire project, but the *Revelations* team was available after that game had shipped.

"The core naval gameplay went to Montréal," Luhe says. "It was a wise decision, too, because otherwise the director was in Montréal and the programmers were in Singapore—it's a twelve-hour time difference. Montréal had a bigger programming team anyway."

With this in mind, Guesdon started trying to square the circle that was fitting a pirate fantasy into the *Assassin's Creed* series.

"Assassins and pirates, these are two different things. But to me, it was not an issue," he says. "Being an Assassin is more of a philosophy. It's about values that you carry. The conflict between the Templars and the Brotherhood—control versus free will—is a never-ending conflict. That is one of the strengths of the franchise. I felt that there was no reason why you couldn't talk about this in the context of the age of pirates."

For *Black Flag*, the Montréal team created the character of Edward Kenway, the grandfather of *Assassin's Creed III*'s Connor. At the time, he was unique in terms of protagonists in the franchise, not least because he only becomes an Assassin right at the end of the game.

"Edward is never an Assassin during *Black Flag*," Guesdon says. "At the end of the game, he welcomes his

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daughter, goes back to England, and stops being a pirate. He's basically a pirate that was catapulted almost against his will in this never-ending war between Assassins and Templars.

"We had Edward start off as young, impetuous, adventurous, and happy with his pirate life; that's the fantasy that people have about pirates. We had to fulfill this desire for the players, who wanted to go to these paradisaic islands and travel around on ships with this guy who thinks that being free means having no rules."

Throughout *Black Flag*'s narrative, however, this idea is tested. The dream of total freedom disintegrates into having nothing.

"You realize that when you follow this path, you cannot build anything," Guesdon says. "Edward has lost all his friends because being a pirate wasn't a long-term lifestyle. At some point, he realizes that this life is going nowhere. His people are starving. It's not fun to be a pirate. So then the opportunity arises to join either the Assassins or the Templars. The former is saying that you can have free will with only a few rules to follow, which will allow you to grow and to build things. While the Templars think that they need to tell you what to do for your own good."

In trying to find some touchstones for who Edward would be, the team looked toward some more modern sources. These included *Star Wars*' infamous space pirate Han Solo and Bodhi from the 1991 classic film *Point Break*.

"When you look at *Point Break*, they're basically contemporary pirates," Guesdon says. "What are they doing? They are robbing banks for money to go surfing and partying on the beach, and drinking around fires. It was really this period of being a little bit at the edge of society saying, 'We are living our good life, and when we need to we go rob some stuff, and it's okay.' And yeah, Patrick Swayze as Bodhi was a reference actually."

Lacoste adds, "Edward was just a bit of a clumsy, reckless guy. That obviously contrasts with what you might expect from an Assassin. It made this character so uniquely interesting because he was still a pirate. Even when he gets to be an Assassin, in my mind he is still a pirate."

A PIRATE'S LIFE

For *Black Flag*, the team set about researching the real world of pirates, including texts like *A General History of the Pyrates* and *The Republic of Pirates*. As with all historical settings, the aim was for authenticity.

"As we homed in on the narrative and gameplay experience, we began to reach out to experts in their respective fields to get more precision on certain topics, and to make sure we always had someone who was responsive to our more detailed questions," McDevitt says. "For my part I worked with the author and journalist Colin Woodard, who was instrumental in reviewing my scripts and answering whatever questions I had while writing the game. The artists and designers talked with Mike Loades about weaponry, and the audio team employed the help of historians and musicians who could make our sea chanteys come to life."

> "FOR *BLACK FLAG*, THE TEAM SET ABOUT RESEARCHING THE REAL WORLD OF PIRATES, INCLUDING TEXTS LIKE *A GENERAL HISTORY OF THE PYRATES* AND *THE REPUBLIC OF PIRATES*."

The image we have in our minds when we think about these rogues of the great wide ocean is largely derived from a handful of sources, namely Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. In reality, there weren't many of the "typical" trappings of the pirate stories we are used to in film and TV.

"Darby was very vocal and adamant on this point," Guesdon says. "All this peg leg, parrot on the shoulder, and so on came from *Treasure Island*. That was amplified by Hollywood and contemporary pop culture.

"So, we told ourselves, 'No peg leg, no parrot.' At some point during game development, we made T-shirts for the team that said, 'No hooks, no parrots, no eye patches.'

"We were bringing the pirate reality, not the pirate fantasy. It's not one hundred percent true, because you want to find some treasure and so on. But when you look at this story, it's not super lighthearted. It's all set under a blue sky, but it was not fun to be a pirate."

All this being said, during development, the team listed elements from the pirate fantasy that they wanted to include within *Black Flag*.

"We looked at all the moments that we felt were representative of a pirate experience," Guesdon says. "We needed a storm, we had to shipwreck the player, we needed them to wake up on the shore of a desert island.

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We had to have lost temples in the jungle, as well as an underwater sequence. This development was just incredible. I still have people coming to me saying it was their best project."

Translating the reality of pirate life to a mass-market audience of one of the most mainstream game franchises at the time was not easy by any means.

"We were making a very mainstream game for a very large audience. The audience of *Assassin's Creed* can go as young as seventeen because it's rated M for Mature, but can go as high as people in their thirties and forties," McDevitt says. "We wanted to appeal to a broad group, so we needed to acknowledge that there was a natural tendency for people to shy away from the more unsavory elements of a story, especially things like the slave trade and sugar trade at that point in time, as well as the fact that a lot of pirates were just straight-up criminals with no redeeming features. Others were a bit more revolutionary in their thinking."

Puel adds, "We transformed piracy and pirates into a pure fantasy. For thousands of people at the time, this was an actual reality. It had geostrategic implications in terms of the gold going from South America to Europe. There were a lot of incredible stories that happened. That was the center of the world at that time. That's where the battles were waged. It had historical significance, and we wanted to look at the real history of pirates. Of course, it's a game. And of course, we had heroes."

That's not to say that history didn't conflict with what the design team wanted to do with *Black Flag*.

"Pirates, for instance, never attacked the navies of Britain, Spain, and France," McDevitt explains. "Doing so would have been absolutely reckless. They would have been horribly outgunned. Pirates almost exclusively focused on robbing merchants and civilians, and they almost never got into fights. They would never sink ships. They rarely fired their guns or killed people. They would just scare the crap out of people, board their ship, threaten them, steal all their stuff, and then set them adrift.

"But it would have been very hard to figure out how to make a game where your primary motivation is frightening people. What would it have meant to sail alongside somebody and scare them? So, of course, the game design loop was: Let's attack. Let's just get into lots of combat, swashbuckling combat, sword fights, and gunplay, but we can't do it against civilians 'cause that would be unsavory, so let's do it against the navy."

Puel adds, "You learn a lot about pirates playing this game. If you only watch film and TV, you don't know anything about piracy. There is so much real history injected into this game. I remember there was some resistance when we first said this would be an *Assassin's Creed* about pirates. People thought it was going to be fantasy, because they associate pirates with a fantasy world. But our depiction of pirates would be a harsh, concrete, real one versus the image of pirates created by pop culture and Hollywood."

The fact that people had been more familiar with the fantastical elements of piracy was, in part, one of the reasons why some people at Ubisoft had been leaning toward having *Black Flag* be a side story instead of the next chapter of the main *Assassin's Creed* narrative.

"I mean, maybe we were afraid of that perception of fantasy," Puel says. "But at some point in the production, we had the courage to say that we were including a fascinating piece of human history. In the beginning, we were a bit afraid of that, but while we were building the game, we realized it was a truly interesting Assassin story."

Though the pirate fantasy was a key aspect of *Black Flag*, for Guesdon it was critical that this would still be an *Assassin's Creed* game at its core. These two aspects needed to be entirely interlinked.

"The message was we were doing one game, a pirate *Assassin's Creed* game," he explains. "My direction was crystal clear: I didn't want an *Assassin's Creed* game on land and a pirate game at sea.

"Being as seamless as possible was important. The gameplay loops we created resulted in this coherence. For example, you would do things on land that would benefit you at sea; you collected chanteys when doing Assassin stuff on land like parkouring—those would then become your pirate radio when you were on the *Jackdaw*. And while at sea, you pillaged ships, which would benefit you on land because you could invest what you had obtained."

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The dev team—who had previously worked on *Assassin's Creed Revelations*—was used to creating urban settings, such as that title's Constantinople. While the series had already experimented with more natural worlds that were less focused on cities with *Assassin's Creed III*'s frontier, a vast and open ocean was an altogether dissimilar prospect.

"When I first started to play the game, I realized the potential for adventure," Azaïzia says. "Until now, *Assassin's Creed* games had hubs and cities; you're either having fun in the hub, or in a city-based environment. With *Black Flag*, the map isn't a couple of cities with a hub; it's literally a world. The player can go wherever they want and it's going to be a big adventure. That was a super-different beast to other *Assassin's Creed* games. The team wanted *Black Flag* to be seamless. You could sail up to an island, jump off your boat, and explore it. Everything was going to be connected. It was very different to what we were used to."

Much like how an enjoyable pirate fantasy didn't quite line up with the reality of that point in history, the team had to come up with some creative ways to include more iconic—albeit anachronistic—elements of *Black Flag*'s Caribbean setting.

"We went to Havana and took a lot of photos," Lacoste says. "We knew that during the period we were setting *Black Flag* in, for instance, the cathedral wouldn't have been there yet. But we decided to play with the potential Animus glitches and feature the iconic elements people would expect to see when they go to the Caribbean and to Cuba. For instance, we had to re-create certain places that, these days, are filled with hotels and concrete and contain no hint of their pirate past. So we worked it by looking at references, engravings, and also by making things using our imagination—what would the pirate haven in Nassau look like? We did the same for Kingston. We were inspired by things like references of houses from the eighteenth century and blueprints of the city. But there was a lot of freedom, for sure."

With *Black Flag*, the multiplayer Wolfpack mode from *Assassin's Creed III* returned. As before, this was built by Ubisoft's team in Annecy, and it had primarily been created on the Anvil engine that the team had souped up for *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*, with one big improvement.

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"We borrowed the rendering part of the single-player game's engine," Granjon says. "So, the lighting in multiplayer mode is much better. And we had better performance."

Whether or not the Annecy team knew that *Black Flag* would be the last entry in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise to include a competitive multiplayer mode (as of the time of this writing), it's safe to say that the studio was incredibly confident in their ability to deliver a fun and interesting experience. Given the game's setting, Annecy decided to include a wider range of characters.

"We went a bit wild with the characters on *Black Flag*. We could have more outlandish people because it was the age of piracy," Granjon explains. "It was a good opportunity."

Annecy also gave players a huge amount of freedom with *Black Flag*'s multiplayer component with the option to create custom games.

"The biggest innovation was the customized game modes," Granjon says. "You could share these with your friends and the community. With *Black Flag*, you can have a game mode where you're only playing with guns. You can have a match where only kills are counted and the player's approach is not. You can change everything: there's two hundred parameters that you can tweak on the game mode generator. It was super powerful and it meant that the player could create a completely different game if they wanted to."

AN *ASSASSIN'S CREED* STORY

During development, *Black Flag* was code-named Golden Age. But as work continued on the project, there was an internal debate about what the game was going to be called upon release. At one point, *Black Flag* wasn't even meant to be a mainline *Assassin's Creed* title; it was set to be called *Black Flag: An Assassin's Creed Story*.

"It could have been a game set in the universe of *Assassin's Creed* but would not have been an *Assassin's Creed* game," Azaïzia explains. "Because you weren't playing as an Assassin for pretty much the whole game. Figuring out how to position the game was vexingly complicated. Our games are supposed to be either

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numbered or have a unique name. *Black Flag* is the only game in the whole series that has both a number and a name. It's *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, because, as developers working on the brand, we were okay with the fact that we could say that *Black Flag* is a game set in the *Assassin's Creed* universe without necessarily sharing the *Assassin's Creed* title."

After *Assassin's Creed III*—and the death of series protagonist Desmond—Ubisoft had a lot more freedom when it came to presenting the framing of its games. Before then, the Animus would only allow people to relive someone's memories in the game if they were a direct descendant of that person.

"We said that the Animus had been upgraded and developed so much that now anybody could relive the life of anybody else," Guesdon says. "That gave us far more freedom, narratively speaking, at the franchise level because it allowed us to justify anybody going anywhere. This was very important because at the time we had the movie in the making, several games in parallel production, and all the comics that were being developed. We needed this narrative freedom. This had all been thought over, and it made sense to once again make the franchise evolve without breaking it."

The present-day setting of *Black Flag* was set in the entertainment division of Abstergo, a.k.a. the Templars, with the events of the game being framed as a game being created by the company. This concept actually had its roots within another *Assassin's Creed* project.

"The Abstergo Entertainment concept for *Black Flag* originated with an earlier game, *Assassin's Creed: Liberation*," McDevitt says. "We loved the idea that Abstergo Industries would have an entertainment division. We felt it would provide a nice change of pace from the modern-day format used in the previous five games."

This was also inspired by Guesdon's work on the transmedia side of things for the *Assassin's Creed* brand.

"This present-day Abstergo Entertainment was the opportunity for us to say that this was the first time that the present-day character wasn't genetically linked to the character from the past," Guesdon says.

Being set in a Montréal-based games studio, it's perhaps not surprising that the Abstergo Entertainment contemporary segments were also intensely self-referential. Not only was it fun for the team to make fun of themselves and games development, but it was also an opportunity to mess with players.

"We teased about potential developments. There were things like a PowerPoint talking about possible kinds of characters to explore," Guesdon laughs. "We were literally playing with the fans and the community about where we'd be going next. We also had this trailer—an actual Hollywood-style trailer with a summer blockbuster–style voice-over—but using our real in-game stuff. We worked it in the very early release style just to have fun. This is cool content to produce because it's not that hard, and it's always fun to laugh a bit about ourselves and to play with the content that we were making."

BRIDGING THE GAP

Black Flag was pioneering in many ways, and it was also the first entry in the franchise to not only launch on the new PlayStation 4 and Xbox One consoles but also on the older PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360.

This introduced some technical questions. For one, the team wanted an experience that was great on all platforms, but the newer hardware was clearly capable of more impressive graphics and had more horsepower.

"When we arrive at the end of a generation on one console, we usually try to push for the best that console can do," Lacoste says. "*Black Flag* looked good on the PS3, but it definitely looked better on the PlayStation 4. But we benchmarked how the game would look based on the PS3.

"We had a dedicated team for scaling up *Black Flag* to the new consoles and I worked closely with them to make sure that the art direction was consistent across all machines. Some people came in and said that we should use a new system for doing shadows or for atmospherics and fog, but that would have completely changed the art direction. We'd have had to rethink lighting in every single part of the world. This wouldn't have worked if we had wanted to scale the production. I wanted to have a solution that would scale the quality we had, but which would have kept all the intended graphics on the current platform. For instance, vegetation textures and lighting would have looked better on the next-gen machines, but we had to make sure that the game would still be beautiful on the current consoles."

Since its release, *Black Flag* has sold more than eleven million copies. The game earned an overwhelmingly positive response, both from critics and from consumers, due to its fresh take on the *Assassin's Creed* franchise.

The sailing aspect of the series was a huge boon for Ubisoft and wasn't something that the firm wanted to give up on just yet.

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ASSASSIN'S CREED III: THE TYRANNY OF KING WASHINGTON

After *Assassin's Creed III*'s release, Ubisoft released two pieces of single-player DLC for it—the most notable of which was probably *The Tyranny of King Washington* by the company's Québec studio.

"There were a lot of questions about what we could do for DLC back then," Côté explains. "I saw an opportunity for growth there for both the Québec studio and for the franchise if we invested more into DLC. I thought we had a chance to do better storytelling, and not just rehash stuff that the player had already done in the original game. Often when I'm done reading a book, I'd love to just keep on reading and see what happens with the characters afterward. That feeling is what I wanted to accomplish. Then we pitched something completely fantastic, which was what if George Washington had taken the Apple of Eden for himself, embraced absolute power, and become a tyrant."

The DLC is effectively a dream sequence shared by Connor and Washington, which, in the history of *Assassin's Creed*, ultimately leads to some hugely important outcomes.

"Washington comes to realize that ultimate, absolute power is the worst thing," Côté says. "As a result, he ends up crafting the Constitution of the United States so that no one can have absolute power."

The fact that this was a dream and therefore outside the realms of reality and realism meant that the Québec studio could have a bit more fun with gameplay. As opposed to the main *Assassin's Creed III* story, it could be far more experimental and fantastical.

"You can see us flexing some of the muscles back from *Prince of Persia* when we were working on more exotic gameplay," Côté says. "We played with stealth, making Connor disappear with the wolf power, and started dabbling around with him being able to fly. That was one of the best projects I've worked on. It was very, very fun."

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ASSASSIN'S CREED III: LIBERATION

Back in 2006, Ubisoft set up a studio in Sofia, Bulgaria, and for the first few years of its existence, this developer specialized in games for handheld consoles, such as *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Shadow Wars* for Nintendo 3DS and DS and Sony PSP title *Chessmaster: The Art of Learning*.

Having proved itself as a capable group for portable projects, Ubisoft Sofia was approached in 2010 to work on an *Assassin's Creed* title for Sony's upcoming PlayStation Vita handheld console.

Liberation was also set in America, though while *Assassin's Creed III* primarily took place in the north of the continent, this Vita title was set in the city of New Orleans as well as the marshy Louisiana bayous.

It's also the first *Assassin's Creed* title to feature a female protagonist: Aveline de Grandpré.

"It was a challenge for us to create a very believable character for this time period, which is core to the brand itself," Ubisoft Sofia creative director Mikhail Lozanov says. "And I believe we created a truly cool character. She's a total badass, absolutely. So, we're very proud of this work."

Though it was coming to a portable machine, this title —what would become *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*— was to be built on the same AnvilNext game engine that powered *Assassin's Creed III*. Home consoles and portable machines are different for a number of reasons, but perhaps the most important factor for developers is energy efficiency. Home consoles are plugged into the main power, so they have a constant supply of power. Whereas handheld machines tend to run on batteries, so they have to be much more energy efficient. Getting an engine primarily designed for PC and console to power a title on PlayStation Vita was a challenge—but one that Sofia was capable of handling.

"We had the right people and with some clever optimizations we made it work," Lozanov says. "It was basically the same editor, the same engine, and the rendering was tight. The Vita was very capable back then compared to what else was on the market."

Puel adds, "The team in Sofia working on this game were magicians. They made things run that we'd thought were impossible to run on a Vita. Technically, it was a real achievement."

But as is frequently the case with game development, a lot of the process is smoke and mirrors. Studios have to come up with rather creative solutions to create something that looks good to players.

"We had a raft in the bayou in *Liberation*. It's presented as though it's Aveline who was navigating the raft, but it was actually a crocodile underneath that was driving the raft," Lozanov explains. "The engine believes that this is a crocodile. Sometimes we had bugs where this raft was eating people and so on."

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ASSASSIN'S CREED ROGUE

While *Black Flag* launched across both the old and new console generations, it wasn't possible to continue serving both these audiences with the same games in the long term. To do so would have been to hold the *Assassin's Creed* franchise back due to the lower power of the older machines.

There was an *Assassin's Creed* game in the works for the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One—*Unity*—but Ubisoft also wanted to bring a new release to the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 at the same time. Dubbed *Rogue*, this would build upon the naval gameplay formula established in *Assassin's Creed III* and *Black Flag*.

The project was being led by Ubisoft Sofia, with work being shared with Singapore.

Rogue is something of a unique entry in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. Previous games had predominantly seen players taking on the role of one of the titular Assassins—with the exception of *Black Flag*—but this entry in the series saw players cast as a Templar.

"We really wanted to explore the gray area between the Assassins and the Templars," Mikhail Lozanov says.

"So far, everything had been pretty black and white, at least in the games. Our desire to explore the gray area was driven by the fact that Assassins and Templars are both morally gray; it's not as simple as one group is evil and the other is good. Their members are humans, after all, and they have this nuance in their characters and nuance in how they make decisions. They have some personality traits as well, and we wanted to explore this. I strongly believe that when we have such characters, they are more relatable, because they're closer to the players who are humans and who play these games."

THE OTHER SIDE

The protagonist of this game was in fact an Assassin turned Templar, Shay Cormac, someone who can see

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the virtues and shortcomings of both factions and their philosophies. Having *Rogue*'s hero be a turncoat was not only an interesting narrative opportunity; it was also done out of a sense of expediency.

"The whole concept and rationale behind this were that we didn't necessarily have the time and resources to flesh out pure Templar gameplay that would make sense," Azaïzia says. "Things like manipulating the crowd and not being able to do parkour. We decided that the character would be a former Assassin who was starting to turn to the Templars and was hunting his former colleagues down."

As always, the character emerged from the story and time period, but the team had some specific inspirations in mind when creating Shay.

"Liam Neeson in *Taken* was a huge inspiration, in terms of his character and his personality. He's very headstrong in that film," Lozanov says. "In terms of his visual appearance and posture, we were inspired by Mads Mikkelsen. I love that actor, he's so human."

With hindsight, Lozanov says it's clear that he put a lot of himself into Shay.

"I guess we included a lot of our personalities into Shay," Lozanov admits. "Whether it was personal stories or things that happened in our lives that made us who we were. All the failures, all the disappointments, all the things that we admired in other people, I think all these things were collected in Shay somehow. When I look back, maybe this was the greatest inspiration. At the time, we never realized that Shay had so many of our personal traits."

The mixture of Assassin and Templar was also conveyed through the gameplay mechanics available to Shay. For the team, it was important to contrast the latter to the Assassins.

"We know that the Assassins believe in free will; they act from the shadows, so have the hidden blade," Lozanov explains. "They kill people, which is not very nice, but they have their reasons. Meanwhile, the Templars are more about control. They want to create this golden cage for people. They want citizens to believe that everything is fine, but the people are actually being constrained. We wanted to reflect the different philosophies of the Templars into our character of Shay and in

THE *JACKDAW* SHIP AT SAN DIEGO COMIC-CON

Golden age pirates were brought back to life at San Diego Comic-Con in 2013 with *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* and the *Jackdaw*. Making a splash at San Diego Comic-Con was no easy feat, but the Ubisoft events team set a new high-water mark by commissioning the *Star of India* (the world's oldest active sailing ship) to re-create Edward Kenway's trusty old brig, the *Jackdaw*. Months of production, historical research, casting, and negotiations with local officials culminated in a week of unforgettable experiences for fans, press, and content creators alike. Onboard, fans were treated to exclusive gameplay demos, sea chanteys, historically accurate artifacts, comic book signings, and other activities. It was truly the ultimate *Assassin's Creed* experience!

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his outfit when he transforms. He has his gun, which he can use to manipulate the crowd. He can create commotion and confusion with bombs. He can achieve his goals by silently eliminating and manipulating the guards with misdirection. This is like an extension of the Templar philosophies of control and order."

This contrast wasn't just limited to gameplay mechanics. While Shay still had some of the aesthetic common to the Assassins, his outfit was very different to what we were used to, thanks to his shift in allegiances.

"He has kept his hood from the Assassins so that he can remain hidden," Lozanov says. "But there is a clear transition with his outfit. The Assassins traditionally had a lighter tone to their clothing, whereas Shay dresses in a much stricter, formalized, militaristic fashion that includes the black coat of the Templar Order."

Azaïzia adds, "Assassins are generally super slick and inspired by an eagle. We wanted the Templars to contrast that. If you look at Shay with his high-collared jacket, he looks like a fortress. It's designed to be square and grounded."

"ASSASSINS ARE GENERALLY SUPER SLICK AND INSPIRED BY AN EAGLE. WE WANTED THE TEMPLARS TO CONTRAST THAT. IF YOU LOOK AT SHAY WITH HIS HIGH-COLLARED JACKET, HE LOOKS LIKE A FORTRESS."

The contrast also carried over to his ship, the *Morrigan*. The sailing ship of *Black Flag*, helmed by Edward Kenway, was a large vessel that preferred fighting from a distance in cannon battles. Shay's vessel, by contrast, was smaller but capable of much more brute force.

Alongside a change in the faction of the playable character, the setting dictated that naval gameplay needed to evolve as well. *Rogue* was set in iceberg-heavy parts of the Arctic Ocean as well as North America, which was a far cry from the tropical Caribbean of *Black Flag*.

"We had to adapt the naval conflict to a northern sea where we had icebergs and ice sheets that you can break," Lozanov explains. "Naturally, we used them to create challenges or obstacles for the player to tackle. You can use icebergs as a shield or to break line of sight and escape, if you want to. We had to adapt the ships to this new environment and added the battle ram, a new addition to the ship. The smaller ship can use the battle ram for more precise tactics. It was an evolution and an expansion of *Black Flag*. We needed to evolve this ship with a few additions, which of course were a reflection of what the Templars were doing in terms of manipulation and control. So, we had the battle ram, which you can use to break ice. As a Templar, you break, you manipulate, and divide and conquer is your metaphor."

He continues, "I strongly believe that when you establish a vision or idea for a game, or any creative work, it should be seen in every single detail of the game itself. If we established a position that we wanted to portray in the Templar philosophy, then every single thing in the game should have been reflected through the prism of that vision and exposed some element of it."

Rogue was created in a short amount of time, too. The first pitch meetings took place in the autumn of 2013, around the launch of *Black Flag*. The final game launched in November 2014. This was, in part, because the title was built on tools that the team had been using for years and which they had a tight handle on.

"We were so competent with the tools that we went from nothing to being in alpha in an extremely quick time," Luhe remembers. "We had a lot of time to actually polish and make that game as good as it could possibly be. We almost surprised ourselves with how early we had hit alpha and beta stages. That allowed us to do a lot of player tests, look at where the pain points were, and push the tech as far as it could go."

He continues, "When the tools are there and you have the team that can do it, it can be done that quickly. Yes, the high-level story would have been done before then. There would have been stuff that had been in the works for probably the year before we started production. It was a real team effort to get it done within nine to twelve months, for sure."

The release of *Rogue* marked the end of the Kenway Saga, but the effects of the game would be felt in the future of the franchise, not least because one of Shay's victims was a Parisian Assassin by the name of Charles Dorian.

This might have been the end of the Kenway dynasty, but it was the beginning of the next chapter in *Assassin's Creed*.

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ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG— FREEDOM CRY

In the wake of *Black Flag*, Ubisoft Québec released a standalone piece of content called *Freedom Cry*. Where *Assassin's Creed III* and *Black Flag* had shied away from the topic of slavery in America and the Caribbean, *Freedom Cry* dove straight in.

"As with every *Assassin's Creed* game, the key is authenticity," art director Thierry Dansereau explains. "Working with historians, doing research, and knowing what we're about to depict is vitally important to reproducing the time and place in a respectful and accurate manner. That's the key here. We try to create a world that depicts the time period and location we are exploring without censoring it through a modern lens. It's up to the player to decide what's good or bad. We're not trying to promote personal opinions, politics, or push an agenda when making *Assassin's Creed*. We are trying to give the players an accurate depiction of the historical realities of that time period, and then it's up to the player to decide how they want to engage with that world and formulate their own opinions."

The title stars Adéwalé, previously seen as Edward Kenway's quartermaster in *Black Flag*. He was the first Black Assassin to star in the franchise. His design was inspired by his previous life as an enslaved person, having been born into bondage in Trinidad.

"We fully embraced the grittier aspects of the character," Dansereau says. "We even gave him a machete, as an acknowledgment of the enslaved people who would have had to use that to cut sugarcane."

The name itself—*Freedom Cry*—was derived from the time period and came to Dansereau via, of all places, reggae culture.

"There's a dancehall singer called Sizzla who did an album called *Freedom Cry*," he explains. "The name resonated well with the game—it refers to these chants the enslaved people used to sing in the field to carry messages. The white guards couldn't catch the subtleties of what they were saying; they thought they were just singing. But in fact, they were communicating among one another."

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE AGE OF REVOLUTION

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ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY

As ambitious as *Assassin's Creed Unity* was upon release, the initial vision was in fact far grander in scale.

The title was intended as something of a reboot of the series built for the new consoles that were on their way. Like everyone, Ubisoft wanted to really make a splash with this brand-new and more powerful hardware. It was being developed by the team that had worked on *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*, released back in 2010, which meant that the game had been in development for almost four years by the time it came to release. That's a long time.

"*Assassin's Creed Unity* was always going to be a big, technical step forward and serve as a benchmark of what next-gen gaming could look like," Luhe remembers. "Even when I was working on *Brotherhood*, I remember seeing some target gameplay footage of *Unity* and it absolutely blew my mind."

McDevitt adds, "It was definitely the longest *Assassin's Creed* project that had ever been in the works. It was very, very ambitious in those first years."

In fact, for quite a while, creative director Alexandre Amancio was pushing for the game to just be called *Assassin's Creed*. "Obviously, that didn't happen," explains Travis Stout, who was the lead writer on the project. "In the end, we dropped the number from the title, so it wasn't *Assassin's Creed V: Unity*, it was just *Assassin's Creed Unity*. The idea was that we were starting over on a new console generation and he wanted it to be a clean slate for the whole franchise."

The plan was to start fresh to try to get new fans onboard: people who perhaps didn't have seven games' worth of backstory and knowledge that they would have to get caught up on.

In some ways, *Unity* was a return to the core of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. It was an open-world game that gave the player a beautiful, sprawling city to explore at a volatile and interesting time of history. The final version of the game centered on the French Revolution, but the initial plan for *Assassin's Creed Unity* was far more ambitious in scope.

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"Right at the start, the game was supposed to allow the main character to travel between four different time periods within the same game," Azaïzia remembers.

These were going to be medieval France, revolutionary France, the belle époque, and the Second World War. What's more, each period was going to have its own protagonist. Ultimately, this idea was dropped for a number of reasons.

"When development started, four years until the release seemed like a long time," McDevitt explains. "But when you're that ambitious, you learn quickly that, actually, this idea needed eight years to be done right. In the end, the team scaled the concept back to just the French Revolution."

He continues, "The problem with four time periods is that you can say, 'Oh, we'll just do these small districts,' but there's still a floor that you can't go below. If you're going to create even a small amount of the belle époque, you need to create all the costumes for the characters, all the art, all the sound, all the voices, all of the buildings. Even if it's gonna be just one city block, it doesn't matter. There's a bare minimum you have to do, and it's unreasonable."

Azaïzia adds, "When we started to work on the engine itself and get into the technical feasibility of the concept rather than just dreaming, we realized within the first couple of months that it wasn't possible."

Not only was this concept a challenge on a technical level; it was also a difficult circle to square from a pure game design perspective.

"It was a technical nightmare, but narratively it was even worse," Azaïzia remembers. "How do you explain things like your weapons? When you move from the medieval period to World War Two, does your sword just turn into a gun? What would happen?"

The studio decided to focus on the French Revolution as the game's main setting. Partially this was done because that was the period that would resonate best with a global audience.

"We did a lot of consumer testing in the US; I spent a lot of time in New York explaining and showcasing iconic elements from the French Revolution," Allonier says. "Things like the guillotine, the flag—though that didn't exist at the time. People were partially aware of this, but the French Revolution was the best or easiest time period to choose to talk about French history. We could have gone with Napoleon. We did discuss Charlemagne. But the French Revolution was the best choice, not only because of the events at this point in history, but because it influenced other revolutions around the world.

"It was iconic enough but not too Frenchcentric."

The idea of multiple time periods might have been dropped for the main setting of *Unity*, but they did make it into the final version of the game.

"We had what were called Time Anomalies," Azaïzia says. "You spend most of your time during the French Revolution, but there are flashbacks to medieval Paris where you can see Jacques de Molay being burned alive or Paris during the occupation in World War II, Paris during belle époque. These were all designed on paper to be fully playable."

The initial idea of having multiple time periods was partly tied to some ambitions that Ubisoft had had for the modern-day framing of *Assassin's Creed*. With Desmond dead as of *Assassin's Creed III*, the crew had been working to create what was called Initiates, a web-based platform that would have connected everything related to *Assassin's Creed*. While Initiates did actually launch, it was more of a community hub than a platform.

"The team wanted this game to introduce the idea that the player was the modern-day hero," McDevitt explains. "If you're a member of Initiates, you'll get a lot of extra cool present-day stories fed to you during the game. One of the ideas was that periodically during *Unity*, Abstergo locates you and sees that you're mucking around in [the protagonist] Arno's memories. They try to kill you. And so, you have to escape that simulation and jump into some other parallel simulation of Paris. You escape by going through the belle époque or by going through the Middle Ages. And then you jump back out and that buys you time to continue Arno's story. So that was my proposal for reusing these assets that had been created."

A REVOLUTIONARY HERO

Helming *Assassin's Creed Unity* was Arno Dorian. The son of an Assassin, Arno was raised by a Templar after having been orphaned by one Shay Cormac in *Assassin's Creed Rogue*. In part, he was a reaction to some of the criticisms that Ubisoft had received over *Assassin's Creed III*'s protagonist, Ratonhnhaké:ton.

"There was a sense—rightly or wrongly—that Connor from *Assassin's Creed III* was not particularly beloved by most of the fan base compared to someone like Ezio," Stout remembers. "There was definitely a sense that we wanted to move back to a less reserved, less stoic, and a less stiff protagonist."

Though the fans clearly loved Ezio, the narrative team wasn't in a rush to just do another version of this

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character, but this time with a French accent rather than an Italian one.

"The idea of that to us was boring," Stout says. "We'd already done three games with Ezio. So, at least for me, a lot of Arno's character was crystallized in the very first scene, where you see him as an adult. You've seen him get his father's pocket watch from his body; that is clearly a very significant item to him. Then we cut to him in the game's present day having gambled that pocket watch in a game of cards that he was absolutely certain that he was going to be able to win. That moment solidified the idea that this character was ridiculously overconfident and thought that he could just bulldoze his way through anything."

That aspect of the character was emphasized partially because that's how a lot of people play video games. But it was a challenge to make this work within the context of a video game.

"I think that was a fun thing to do with a video game protagonist," Stout explains. "A lot of the time, that attitude would mirror some of the player's experience. We've all had that moment of playing a game, whether it's *Assassin's Creed* or some other game, where you jump down into this group of ten guards and think you'll kick their asses, but end up being wrecked. I wanted to bring a little bit of that to Arno.

"It was a tough line to walk. Because on the one hand it was an interesting character dynamic, but on the other hand video games are very much a power fantasy and we didn't want to make the character feel inept or clumsy. We tried to find that balance of making him a little too confident in his abilities while also fulfilling the player's fantasy of being the elite badass, assassin, fighter, sneak thief, killer guy, etc."

Similar to *Black Flag*'s Edward Kenway, Arno is somewhat disconnected from the Assassin Brotherhood.

"I wanted to do a character who wasn't particularly motivated by the Assassins' philosophy," Stout says. "The Assassins are pretty much a means to an end for him. His primary thing was that he felt deeply, deeply guilty for thinking that he had gotten his adoptive father killed. He was a little less ideologically motivated, but I also didn't want *Unity* to purely be a revenge story. Arno's story was never about getting revenge on the man who killed his adoptive father. It was about trying to make amends for his own perceived failing."

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A DIFFERENT REVOLUTION

The decision to depict the French Revolution came with its own challenges and the team had to tread a bit more lightly this time around when it came to the history of the period. The French Revolution might have occurred over two hundred years ago, but there was still a degree of contentiousness about how it should be presented.

"Whenever people talk about the Founding Fathers and the American Revolution, they tend to agree on most of the elements. There aren't necessarily two visions of the past," Durand says.

"However, current politics in France are still based upon interpretations of the French Revolution. There are left and right ends of the political spectrum, but they have other names that are based on how the political system was created during the French Revolution. It's still very much alive in their minds, and how history is taught in France is very important."

Azaïzia adds, "There were more debates than we ever had had in the past because of the way we chose to portray some of the historical characters. We ended up showcasing figures like Robespierre. In France, he is still heavily debated. Robespierre was a revolutionary, but at the same time, he had a pretty rough history. He had people—including scientists, like Lavoisier, and journalists—executed because he felt they were too moderate. That's quite hardcore and intense. Thus, we depicted him as not being a very nice guy, which of course led to a lot of discussion in France."

As is always the case, the Ubisoft team turned to experts in the time periods they were setting games in. They did this both to pick the experts' brains and to discover whether or not they were on the right track. For *Unity*, this included Dr. Jean-Clément Martin.

Ubisoft also avoided what had internally been described as the "Forrest Gump effect" from *Assassin's Creed III*. This was the tendency for the main character to be present for almost every single important event from the historical period. With *Unity*, history was going to be a backdrop for the story.

"We realized that steering away from historical events gave us more opportunities to offer creative missions and to make the best *Assassin's Creed* game. Truly it felt like trying to give a better sense of the time period was going to be more important than just sticking to certain historical events."

Azaïzia continues, "Aside from the very beginning of the game, where we see Louis XVI give his speech at the Estates-General, the rest of the game is really about Templars and Assassins.

"In *Assassin's Creed Unity*, we tried to look for events that people may not have considered quite so iconic, like the Cult of Reason ceremony where Robespierre gives

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his big speech about how they're going to rebuild France as this logical, philosophically reasoned nation. A lot of people, at least those outside of France, didn't really learn about this in their history education. It was very much an intentional decision to not have Arno stumble into every major figure. Even when we did go to the big events, it was always serving as a backdrop to what Arno was actually doing. It was never a case of Arno having to protect someone so that they can reach the place where they make a famous speech or something. Instead, it was focused on Arno's actions, and in the background Robespierre is giving a speech or Mirabeau is doing some political maneuvering or something."

That's not to say that *Unity* shies away from the history of the period. As always, players rub shoulders with important and powerful figures from the era. The game as a whole is just a very different entry in the franchise.

Unity's story is also a much more individualized one. Primarily, Arno is trying to exact revenge on the people who killed his adoptive father so he can find his own redemption.

"Arno doesn't really have strong feelings one way or the other about whether the Templars or the Assassins are right or wrong," Stout explains. "He mostly wants to redeem himself and be with the woman he loves."

"It's a very personal story for Arno," McDevitt says. "But you still meet a lot of people like Napoleon in the main story, and then the next time you encounter him is during a side mission."

Unity's gameplay was a real return to the original *Assassin's Creed*. In fact, it was intended as a soft reboot of the franchise, one that returned to the series' roots and which didn't concern itself with the wealth of new gameplay mechanics that had been introduced in more recent iterations.

"The thinking was that *Black Flag* was going to be the last legacy game from the previous iteration," Azaïzia remembers. "*Unity* was literally built on our new engine. It was going to be an entirely new flagship game. What stood out from development was that we were tackling so many different subjects at the same time. In the past, we were able to iterate really quickly with games like *Brotherhood* and *Revelations*, but those had been done on the same engine. We knew that tech really well. This was the first time since the original *Assassin's Creed* where we had tabula rasa, an entirely blank slate. We were going to start fresh again, so we couldn't use the legacy of anything that came before. There was no way we could use naval gameplay or any other features that had been previously developed because we were starting from scratch."

The Montréal team was revisiting more or less every aspect of the franchise, even its combat systems.

"For the very first time in the saga, you could fight multiple opponents," Azaïzia says. "A couple of opponents could attack the player at the same time, rather than just waiting to attack in order."

Even fundamental elements like parkour were redesigned—pun intended—from the ground up.

"Players have always had the ability to go really fast when they are ascending a building," Azaïzia explains. "*Unity* was the first—and only—game in the series to feature what we called 'Controlled Descent.' That's where you can parkour down a building really quickly. It's probably the best way we used parkour in the whole saga and franchise."

URBAN JUNGLE

Compared to *Assassin's Creed III*'s western frontier and the Caribbean Sea of *Black Flag*, *Unity* took the gameplay back to its more urban roots. For some this was a welcome return, but after several years of designing worlds, building and filling a city with content proved to be a challenge.

"The whole game was focused on a city rather than a huge open world," Azaïzia says. "In *Unity*, we tried to fix so many things in the game. At one point, we lost track of some of the design ideas. If you look at the map, there are tons of activities and things to do, which was an issue in the end because the map was just full of dots of different colors. What we saw was that players basically picked a destination and stayed focused on the map instead of looking at their surroundings. The game was one of the most beautiful we had ever crafted, and still players were playing just with the radar, which was something we missed."

Initially, the narrative was designed to stay away from certain aspects of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. For example, the initial plan was not to feature many, if any, artifacts from the First Civilization. In fact, there was only meant to be one reference to this part of the series' lore.

"It was going to be a purely human and personal story," Stout says. "The only reference in the game was going to be a tiny Easter egg located in the first scene where Arno meets Napoleon at the sack of the palace. Napoleon is searching for something and eventually he opens a little box; a golden glow comes up onto his face. It was just a tiny little Easter egg for people who remembered that one of the puzzles in *Assassin's Creed II* showed Napoleon with the Apple of Eden. That was originally the only thing we were going to have there."

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This changed as the gameplay team tried to figure out how to end the game. These developers wanted something more dynamic for *Unity*'s final boss fight.

"That's why Germain had the sword," Stout explains of the game's ultimate antagonist. "We didn't really go into how or why he had it because we felt like it was something that Arno wouldn't have known about or been particularly invested in learning about. It came as a surprise to him."

The idea of cooperative gameplay in *Assassin's Creed* goes all the way back to *Prince of Persia: Assassins*. For a long time, developers had wanted to include this kind of functionality within the main stories of the franchise, but technical limitations meant that this wasn't possible. Instead, co-op components were relegated to separate game modes.

With *Unity*, the team decided to jump headfirst into this kind of mechanic, with up to four players being able to help one another out on specific missions. In fact, *Unity* was the code name the game was given while still in development for a very specific reason.

"Since *Brotherhood*, there had been multiplayer mode within *Assassin's Creed*, but it wasn't at the core of the experience," explains Allonier. "When you launched the game, you had the single-player experience on one side and multiplayer on the other. The goal was to unify these two experiences: co-op and single player."

One of the reasons that co-op was pulled from the original *Assassin's Creed* was that it was another demanding feature in a game that was already wildly ambitious. These were titles with huge crowds, a fully climbable city, and the variety of systems that went with such features.

For *Unity*, the team came up with a novel way of handling features like the massive crowds of nonplayable characters.

"Crowd replication was a huge technical issue," Azaïzia says. "When you play the game, there are literally hundreds of people on the screen. The thing is that you should have the exact same crowd on the screen at the same time; it's meant to be four players versus the environment. The way replication works, in order to save memory, is that we know the position of NPCs onscreen, but we don't know what they look like. This means that if one player is hiding in the crowd, my friend might see that I am near two doctors and one courtesan, but on my screen, I would see different NPCs in that exact spot. For various gameplay reasons, it's super hard to have the same thing displayed for everyone at the same time."

Unlike *Assassin's Creed* games since *Brotherhood*, *Unity* didn't feature a typical multiplayer mode. This was something that was planned for the game—with a system where players would be able to create their own avatar for these segments of the game—but as with a lot of the more ambitious ideas in that project, it just was not possible.

"Players were going to be able to design their own avatar, male or female," McDevitt says. "The team went down that path for a very long time.

"The team had to scale this back to just a handful of co-op missions within revolutionary France. The idea of creating your own avatar was scrapped, too."

This is the root of one of the most infamous news stories surrounding *Assassin's Creed Unity*: that you couldn't play as a woman within the game because women were hard to animate.

"We never explained what actually had happened," McDevitt says. "Players were originally supposed to be able to make a male or female avatar, but Arno was going to be the protagonist in the revolutionary France parts of the game. When we had to scale back everything, we realized that meant that everyone would have to play as Arno, even in the multiplayer sections.

"That meant that you were never going to be able to create your own character, and so you were going to have to play as Arno. When you saw your friends, they were going to be portrayed as generic men, because they couldn't be four Arnos. Right? It was a very unfortunate situation where the original plans were scaled back so quickly, but they just had to use what they had."

Though for the team and many players out in the world, *Unity* is remembered as a beautiful and ambitious title, for a lot of people, *Unity* will recall images of a glitchy and broken game. This was in part due to the title's new engine, as well as the crew's sheer ambition when it came to *Unity*. The game was more or less a reinvention of the franchise and—by Ubisoft's own admission—the team bit off more than it could chew.

"We learned the hard way that you can't release a massive open-world game that is free of bugs, glitches, and so on," Azaïzia says. "We had tried to tackle every single element of game design at the same time: challenge navigation, parkour, fighting, and the lighting system. Having multiplayer on top of that was way too much. We should have either waited and delayed the game for at least six months in order to be able to offer a game that was quite stable, or we simply should have been a little less ambitious at the release and done something like we had done in the past."

The following year, Ubisoft would release a game that was still ambitious in its approach, though it had learned a lot from *Unity*'s development and launch.

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NOTRE-DAME DE PARIS

Notre-Dame de Paris is a jewel of Gothic architecture, and one of the most iconic monuments to be featured in *Assassin's Creed Unity*. The developers attempted to ensure that its rendition in the game would be both beautiful and faithful to the real monument. Caroline Miousse, a level artist on *Assassin's Creed Unity*, spent close to two years modeling the landmark inside and out. Working with historians, she researched every individual area of the cathedral, and combed through photos, videos, and architectural plans to create a digital model that was as accurate as possible.

After a fire damaged the cathedral in 2019, Ubisoft used the 3D reconstruction of the monument to create a virtual visit in *Notre-Dame de Paris: Journey Back in Time*. This free experience allows everyone to visit the cathedral, which as of 2023 is still closed for restoration. The virtual visit offers multiple points of view, some of which were previously inaccessible to the public. The experience ends spectacularly with a hot-air balloon flight over the cathedral's arches, set in a lively representation of Paris as it was in the eighteenth century.

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ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE

Though a huge number of Ubisoft studios had contributed to the *Assassin's Creed* franchise in its first few years, development of nearly all the mainline entries in the series had been led by the company's Montréal studio.

That changed with *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*.

With this project, Ubisoft Québec took the lead. This was a huge step up for the studio; they had worked on the series before, contributing to the likes of *Brotherhood* and *Assassin's Creed III*, but this was their time to shine.

"We were finishing up *The Tyranny of King Washington* and there were lots of questions at the studio about what the next big thing would be," Côté remembers. "At the time, Ubisoft execs had put out a call for projects, which people could pitch for. There was a ton of ideas for the future of the franchise. People were saying that we should go into casual, mobile, or multiplayer games.

"So, one day, I said I wanted to participate in the pitch process. I put on a suit and met with the execs to pitch them as to why Québec should take the leadership role in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. I told them that the next step for us as a studio was to build a full game."

Though Ubisoft Québec had proved itself in the past, management was not entirely onboard with this idea. But they entertained Côté and he had the chance to meet with franchise executive producer Sébastien Puel in Montréal at the end of 2012.

"He was a great ally for the studio over the years," Côté says. "I pitched the idea to him and he thought it was fantastic. The one thing we were missing was a world-class producer for the project."

To fill that role, the team had brought in François Pelland. By April 2013, the Québec studio was given the mandate to build the next entry in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, due for release in 2015.

"If *Unity* was *Assassin's Creed 2.0*, *Syndicate* was to be *Assassin's Creed 2.5*," Azaïzia explains. "The idea was

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that it should basically be what *Brotherhood* was to *Assassin's Creed II*."

Puel had told Côté that he had a blank check when it came to this game's setting; it could be anywhere the team wanted. The Québec studio looked into a few different possibilities including the Napoleonic Wars. But the team eventually landed on Industrial Revolution London, a decision that management had wanted all along.

"So unbeknownst to me, there had been a master plan," Côté laughs. "*Unity* and *Syndicate* were thought about as the revolutions phase. After the French Revolution in *Unity*, the next logical step would have been Industrial Revolution London. I didn't know that, yet I ended up choosing exactly that."

As for why Québec decided on London during the Industrial Revolution, there was a pretty simple answer.

"London felt very attractive as the capital of the world at that time," Côté explains. "There were a bunch of important historical characters—for example, Marx and Darwin—all in London at pretty much the same time. Jack the Ripper was also on the horizon, too. So Victorian London really felt like it was a black hole; we felt pulled toward it. It was too much of a pivotal moment of history to be ignored."

TRANSPORT FOR LONDON

Though city settings were nothing new to the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, London in the Industrial Revolution was unlike any setting that the series had done before. For one, this was the dawn of mass transportation.

"It felt like there was an opportunity for the studio to introduce some really innovative gameplay, with a kind of steampunk feeling to the era," Côté says.

"I really wanted to increase the player's mobility around the city. That's why we ended up investing in creating transportation systems, like trains, buses, and boats on the river Thames. That was super great to build."

Introducing vehicles into *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*'s tech was a technical feat—not only for getting all these systems to work, but also due to the sense of speed they brought about.

"Putting those vehicles into the Anvil engine was the challenge of a lifetime for the engineers," Côté says. "Until that point, the fastest that we had traveled around the world was on a horse. Then we had trains. We were moving at seventy-five kilometers per hour, which was very, very demanding on the loading systems with all the crowds. In a game like *Forza*, you probably went around

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a track at something like two hundred kilometers per hour, but that game was obviously built with different things in mind. There are so many things going on in an *Assassin's Creed* game, so the faster you move, the more challenging it is for the engine especially."

One of *Syndicate*'s other big changes was the ability for the player to be on a surface that was moving. This might not sound like much, but in game development terms it was a huge deal.

"The character could go and jump on a platform that was moving and then still do everything that they could do before, and then climb down," Azaïzia explains.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given Singapore's proficiency when it came to water tech, Québec called upon this studio to re-create London's river Thames. Where before Singapore had either been creating naval sections in isolation or in an open world where water was prevalent, bringing this tech into someone else's open world was a change of pace.

"The mandate that had been decided on—which also tied in to the technological breakthrough that Québec wanted for *Syndicate*—was the ability to parkour on fast-moving platforms," Luhe explains.

"That meant a bustling Thames with lots of barges that the team could use to create gameplay that was set on fast-moving barges. They were also making the river itself, but the technical budgets were very different as this was in the middle of an open-world city. That had been a new challenge for the tech team. Rather than creating something highly innovative that affected gameplay, like they did on *Assassin's Creed III* and *Black Flag*, their job was creating a bustling river within a city that needed to render and do other things in order to re-create a realistic river."

Industrial Revolution London is a setting that has been done to death through popular culture. Close your eyes and you're probably thinking of the desolation of *Oliver Twist*, soot-covered orphans fighting for life in a grim, dark world. Québec wanted to re-create this feeling in places, but to also show a different side of this time period.

"It's still a game that I love going back to," Côté says. "The London we created was breathtaking. We did capture the gritty and smoke-filled atmosphere of the Industrial Revolution, but we also showcased a London that wasn't dark. There were some very beautiful and sunny moments in the environment. One of the team's fears from the beginning was that we would build something that was very dark, and that wasn't something we wanted to do. If you think about it, if someone is going to spend thirty to forty hours in a game, you don't want the atmosphere to be entirely oppressive. That's why we hoped to challenge what people thought about industrial London and build a place that had a lot of contrasts."

At the time of writing, *Syndicate* is the closest that the *Assassin's Creed* franchise has been to the present day. This had its advantages. For instance, the architecture of a city like industrial London was more similar to modern-day London compared to the other games.

"There are a lot of buildings from that era that still exist in London," Thierry Dansereau, the art director on *Syndicate* and *Odyssey*, explains. "The Industrial Revolution wasn't much more than 150 years ago, so we had to make sure to depict the city properly."

> "AT THE TIME OF WRITING, *SYNDICATE* IS THE CLOSEST THAT THE *ASSASSIN'S CREED* FRANCHISE HAS BEEN TO THE PRESENT DAY."

London was also a much more modern city than many that Ubisoft had depicted in the past. For one, large portions of the city featured taller buildings than the company had previously re-created.

"We faced the issue of adding buildings that were five stories high," Dansereau explains. "That's why we introduced the rope launcher; sometimes it took too long to climb buildings."

In many ways, the Industrial Revolution was the perfect setting for an *Assassin's Creed* game. Not only was it a pivotal moment in history, but it also played well into the franchise's themes of liberation versus tyranny. There were stark power dynamics in how the people of London were treated. Many were living in slums, working in factories under the iron rule of industrialists who wanted to squeeze every ounce of labor from them. How this played out in different parts of London was something the narrative team wanted to explore.

"This was a period of great modernization in British culture," Yohalem explains. "Each of the districts had a theme around a different form of modernization, like transportation, science, or invention."

Côté adds, "We wanted to exaggerate the differences a little bit between all the various districts. If the contrast had been too subtle, players might not have noticed it. I remember building places that had a real

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gritty and industrial kind of feeling where you could see people going to work at the factories and traveling toward the richer districts. We wanted to accomplish this depiction of inequality better than what we had done in the past. Because to me, it felt like the Industrial Revolution was one of the moments in history where you could clearly see this stark separation between the rich and the poor."

There were a few ways that the team attempted to indicate these distinctions between the richer and poorer areas of London.

"We played with the notion of scale and spacing," Dansereau says. "The richer the area was, the larger the spaces were. The poorer the area was, the narrower the streets were. When you're in an impoverished area, you don't feel safe; you can't see far ahead, it's claustrophobic because everything is close together.

"But when it's a richer area, there's a park, there's trees, there's vegetation. There's a place to breathe."

The Industrial Revolution setting also gave the team some design goalposts to aim for.

"There were people who made a lot of money in London. Some titans of industry even became wealthier than the queen," Dansereau explains. "We embraced the idea of marketing by putting ads on buildings. Those elements were really fun. It was super interesting to work on the façades of buildings."

He continues, "Since it was the Industrial Revolution, one of our goals was for there to always be something moving onscreen—smoke, cars, and so on—just to embrace that it was a time of motion."

JUST THE TWO OF US

This time around, *Syndicate* had not one but two protagonists for its narrative, in the twins Jacob and Evie Frye. Much like Arno's story in *Unity*, this game had a very personal tale.

"I was focused on Jacob and Evie and making them into likable and interesting heroes with an arc," Yohalem says. "They were dealing with the death of their father.

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It was very exciting from a writing perspective because we started with this idea that their father had just died off camera, before the game even began. They're then dancing around that subject the entire game. It's a game about loss, growth, and how you react to that loss. Both Jacob and Evie have very different reactions, so you're playing through this transformative period of grief in their lives. It isn't directly referenced very often, but this tragic event that occurred right before the game began is really at its center."

The contrast between Jacob's and Evie's personalities isn't just confined to the narrative either. It carries over into the gameplay and how they handle specific situations. For example, Jacob prefers brute force, while Evie is more focused on stealth.

"Jacob would always charge in and try to fix things with force without really thinking about the consequences," Yohalem remembers. "And then Evie would come in afterward and discover that despite Jacob's interference, things had not improved in that district, even though the Templars were gone. So, Evie would figure out a long-term solution that would really aid in the progress of society. This process would then be repeated according to the theme of each particular district."

Given its gangland setting, *Syndicate* also revised how combat worked in *Assassin's Creed*. This time around, Jacob and Evie weren't wielding swords, but rather more low-key weaponry.

"The fighting system was grittier and more violent," Azaïzia says. "You didn't really have swords in London. There weren't really a lot of weapons around, so the player could use things like a cane, brass knuckles, and daggers. That was it."

Though it had—at times—a grim and oppressive setting, Yohalem wanted the story to have a lighter feeling in contrast.

"When I'm writing, there's a feeling that the words communicate," he explains. "It's almost like a color that you see. I wanted to make it fresh. I wanted it to be a comedy. I thought it would be fun to do a buddy comedy in Victorian London because I thought that was not the

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norm. It's a high-stakes comedy. I had been watching a movie, something similar to *22 Jump Street*, and I thought we could do that in Victorian London. I think that's where we escaped some of the clichés of period pieces. This was a story of two undercover cops who had a relationship with each other, who were navigating these bizarre situations together and trying to get to a hidden villain."

As well as being the first time that the *Assassin's Creed* franchise had had two playable characters for the bulk of its story, *Syndicate* is also the first mainline entry in the series to have a female protagonist: Evie Frye.

"One of my first creative objectives when starting out *Syndicate* in early 2013 was for Evie to have a very important place in the game," Côté says. "This is something that we felt passionately about. We wanted the game to build on some of the gains that we had made in terms of inclusiveness and representation with projects like *Freedom Cry*. To me, she had to be playable in the open world."

In the end, gameplay was roughly split two-thirds to one-third between Jacob and Evie. One of the reasons why this was a challenge was due to the tech powering *Syndicate*.

"It was a huge endeavor in terms of production," Côté explains. "It was the first time we had two fully playable characters in our open world, and the engine wasn't really built to be able to support that.

"The easy thing would have been to make Evie a secondary character. However, I remembered working with Jeffrey, and we wanted to build this kind of buddy-cop comedy between Jacob and Evie."

In order to design the Frye twins' look, the team had to go against many of the tenets of the franchise. The duo were decked out in leather coats that gave more of a rock star kind of impression.

"We felt it made no sense to have a person dressed in a white Assassin robe," Dansereau says. "And it also made no sense to be the only guy with a hood up in a Victorian crowd. So that's why we decided to go with the hat. But when Jacob was being stealthy, he'd put his hood on."

He continues, "We could have designed an Assassin to be part of the upper class. But we had decided to go the other way around and have them rebel against the upper class, those industrialists who were ruling the world. So, we decided to fully embrace that rebel aspect, especially for Jacob. They were rebels fighting against the system.

"That was a fun angle. That's why we gave them those leather coats. It felt like we gave Jacob and Evie a sort

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of rock 'n' roll appearance. It was such a good approach from a visual standpoint."

As mentioned before, *Syndicate* is the nearest that *Assassin's Creed* has come to the present. When it came to designing combat, that posed some interesting questions.

"We had to challenge ourselves in how we were going to use or represent guns and other modern weapons," Azaïzia says. "There was a big leap in time between *Unity* and *Syndicate*, but we wanted to avoid giving the main characters guns because we didn't want the game to end up being like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Watch Dogs*. *Syndicate*—as with all *Assassin's Creed* games—was really about getting up close and personal and using the weaponry that you had. That allowed us to play with these restrictions with respect to the gameplay."

"WE HAD TO CHALLENGE OURSELVES IN HOW WE WERE GOING TO USE OR REPRESENT GUNS AND OTHER MODERN WEAPONS."

GOING SOLO

Like *Unity* and *Assassin's Creed* games going back to *Brotherhood*, *Syndicate* was initially meant to have a multiplayer component. The team had "huge ambitions" for that part of the game, but it ended up being cut because the engine just couldn't properly handle that kind of gameplay.

"It was an unhappy moment in the history of the franchise," Côté remembers. "The technical foundations of multiplayer mode were shaky, and it was very difficult to iterate and improve upon. With the new engine it took two to three times longer to build anything than it had previously in order to support multiplayer components. Our iteration time was pretty much killed. The saddest part was that we had to completely drop that feature, and you haven't seen it return in the franchise. That was actually a big loss."

As was always the case, the multiplayer mode was intended to be an iteration or evolution on the systems from previous *Assassin's Creed* games. *Unity* had introduced co-op gameplay into the franchise, so the intent was for *Syndicate* to take this up a notch.

"The pitch was to build more co-op missions," Côté says. "We wanted to have some kind of a full co-op campaign. That felt like the natural next step after *Unity*."

That part of the game was created at Ubisoft Montréal.

"So, *Unity* had co-op missions and raids. The plan was to use the multiplayer system from *Unity* along with the online tech to do our own version of that for *Syndicate*," Bergeron says. "We worked on a proposal for what this online component could be like in Montréal for about six months. Part of the plan was to have raids using the linear gameplay sequence philosophy to allow players to go to different parts of England to do heists with other people. Ultimately, that was scrapped because of scope and time."

One of the reasons that the multiplayer feature was cut from *Syndicate* was the Québec studio's focus on vehicles in the game. Re-creating these systems proved too difficult for multiplayer.

"We had prototypes for multiplayer mode," Côté says. "It all came down to one point where we realized that the tech just wouldn't stretch to have these city-wide vehicles, carriages, and all this gameplay that we thought was essential for a better single-player game. So, we had what I would say was the eternal industry conundrum of whether we would build a great single-player game or an average single-player game with a multiplayer component.

"We chose to build a great single-player game and put all our money, investment, and effort there. I still consider it unfortunate that we ended up obliterating the entire network stack in the process to optimize and focus *Syndicate*."

Despite being a fresh take on the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, *Syndicate* was far from the strongest-selling title in the series to date. In its first two years on sale, the game sold just 5.5 million copies.

That's not to say that Ubisoft Québec let the company down—far from it. The team did a stellar job with *Syndicate* and proved themselves worthy of leading an *Assassin's Creed* project. Speculation suggested that this was a knock-on effect from the negative reception that *Unity* had received twelve months earlier, while some felt that consumers were tired of annual entries in the franchise.

Assassin's Creed was Ubisoft's biggest IP by a mile; something drastic was needed to change the story. To do so, the company decided to go back to the beginning.

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CHAPTER FIVE

ANCIENT ASSASSINATION

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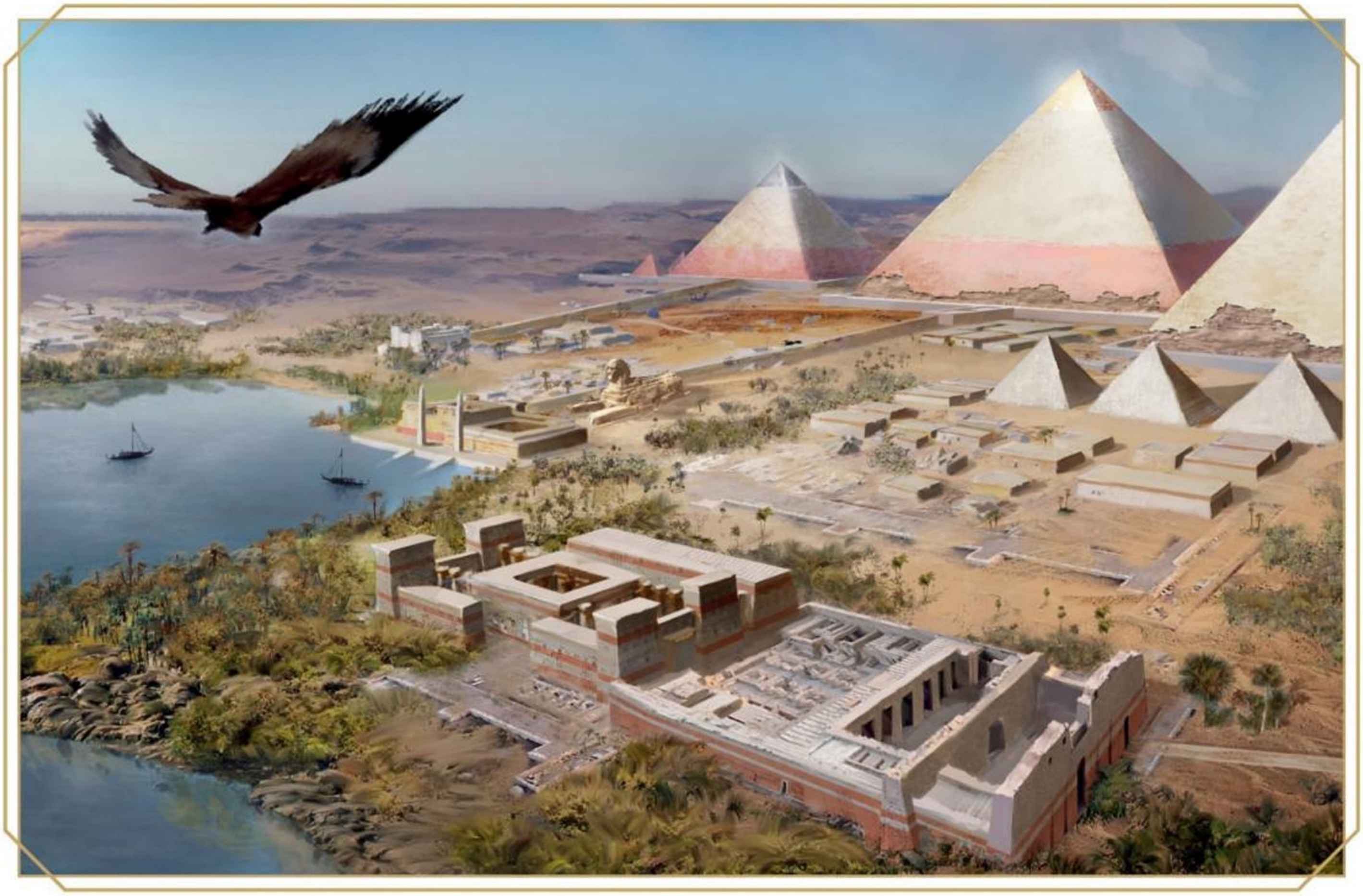

ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS

After releasing 2013's *Black Flag*, the development team that had shipped that title wanted to try something a little different.

For about three months after the game shipped, Jean Guesdon gave the crew free rein to have fun coming up with their next project. The team toyed around with ideas that took some of the proven concepts of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise in a very different direction.

One of these was a different take on *Black Flag*'s formula, where instead of piloting that game's *Jackdaw* around the seas, players would have been navigating a rather different space.

"You were in the *Jackdaw* and by pressing a button you would take off," Guesdon says. "And there were floating islands that you could dock at. The idea was to toy with this notion of what went well with *Black Flag*. The strength of that world was its archipelago structure. Having a procedural sea is not worthwhile at some point, which meant we could focus the content on islands and points of interest. It was a big game, but you know, it didn't take up as much space as the Caribbean we had in *Black Flag* did. The idea was whether we could do this kind of archipelago but in 3D."

Another of these concepts would have taken the *Assassin's Creed* franchise in an incredibly different direction.

"Our artists were exploring oddball concepts," Guesdon says. "These ideas were way more sci-fi than anything we had done before. I was thinking about how I could give the artists as much freedom as possible, so I toyed with the idea of a First Civilization game. That would basically make anything conceivable."

McDevitt adds, "We felt limited by just sticking to realism. We toyed with the idea of doing a First Civ game. We had all these prototypes for flying hover ships, First Civ cities, and technology beyond your wildest dreams. The idea was that you'd be playing as one of the humans who had rebelled against the Isu."

In the end, this concept was dropped. Though very enticing and technically part of the *Assassin's Creed* series, the idea of a First Civ game was likely too far away from the brand's core DNA.

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"It would have been a hard sell internally," Guesdon admits. "The *Assassin's Creed* franchise is rooted in mystery."

McDevitt adds, "It would have been a really cool game and we would have been able to do a lot of interesting things, but it probably wouldn't have had very broad appeal. First Civ is very self-contained within the *Assassin's Creed* brand. You'd have to really love the brand to want to play that game."

Still, after being tired of *Assassin's Creed* after *Black Flag*, the developers used this exercise to shake the cobwebs from their minds. The team was once again ready to do something new within the franchise, but this time wanted to do something novel and fresh.

Since its inception, the series had been encroaching nearer and nearer to the present day. At the time, Guesdon had been reading up about Cleopatra, which turned the team's eye toward Egyptian history.

"I did a breakdown of the Greek, Roman, and Egyptian time period in a PowerPoint," Guesdon explains.

"I had looked at the world potential, the narrative potential, the Assassins-versus-Templars potential, the secrecy, the gameplay, and so on."

Through this Guesdon found that the period was a strong fit for the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. It was a turning point at the time, and was also rich with historical characters who would add color to a game set in this era.

"In pure historical or educational terms, it was wild," Guesdon says. "When you have Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, we are good. These are all Leonardo da Vinci–like characters; everybody knows them, but not in detail. There were also some mythological and supernatural things that we could include.

"In the end, my pitch to headquarters was that this was the perfect setting for an *Assassin's Creed* game, especially when we wanted to refresh it."

Thus, *Assassin's Creed Origins* was born. As is nearly always the case with game development, the initial plan for the project was far more ambitious in scope with a setting that was far larger.

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"We were basically considering the entirety of Cleopatra's reign, including Greece and Turkey," Guesdon says. "The idea was how could we leverage what we had learned with *Black Flag*. I saw the opportunity to use the Mediterranean Sea as a buffer from a technological standpoint between Egypt and Greece. We could have these massive land maps separated by water so that we could load one after another."

This concept was actually prototyped using the same procedural generation tech that had been used for *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Wildlands*. Not only did Montréal run into loading problems re-creating the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea—from Syria to Palestine via Lebanon—but the initial vision for this project would have required a lot of asset creation.

"Within six months to nine months, we realized that this is a massive amount of content to create," McDevitt explains.

"We would have had to build all of the Greco-Roman areas, Turkey, Syria, Petrea, and then Egypt. We were going to go only as far as Memphis, and no further because it was just a massive area. We had a real come-to-Jesus moment where the team was sitting around, and I was listing off everything we were going to need: a variety of character types, their outfits, equipment, and voices. The art team was going to have to design all these Greco-Roman elements.

"We also wanted a boat system. We wanted you to be able to jump on a trireme and go all over the map. Very early on, we recognized that we didn't want to fall into the same trap that *Unity* did."

As a result, the team opted to reduce the game's scope and really focus on specific parts of this area.

"Long story short, at some point, I said, Let's just do a diptych," Guesdon explains. "We could have the rise of Cleopatra in *Origins* and then have a second game taking place mostly in Greece and Turkey about her relationship with Mark Antony."

The latter would inspire *Odyssey*, the game that followed *Origins*. The reign of Cleopatra was an interesting

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point in time for an *Assassin's Creed* game given that it was an era when the Egyptian empire was in decline while the Roman Empire was only continuing to rise in prominence.

"People don't necessarily realize that it was an empire that was crumbling," Azaïzia says.

"They don't know that Cleopatra was basically the first ruler in hundreds and hundreds of years to even speak Egyptian. Her own dynasty, the Ptolemaic, hadn't bothered to learn the language. It was a fascinating time; there's an amazing mix of every cliché we know about Egypt. We had the pyramids, the way the warriors dressed, and we could include everything that the average person would know. In addition, we had an amazing cast, so that was definitely the time period where we wanted to set our game."

A NEW CREED

Origins was also perhaps the largest leap that the *Assassin's Creed* series had made in terms of gameplay in quite some time. Even before the lukewarm reception to both *Unity* and *Syndicate*, there was clearly a feeling within Ubisoft that the franchise needed to be refreshed in some way.

For *Origins*, the team started to incorporate more elements from RPGs into the mix. This included things like an entirely revamped combat system—inspired in part by CD Projekt's *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*—while the missions of the older games were swapped out for multipart quests.

"We're always inspired and motivated by the games that come out during development. That's for sure," Guesdon explains. "*The Witcher 3* definitely brought something very strong to the table for a lot of people, including members of the dev team. We looked at it very carefully and seriously.

"We already knew we wanted to move forward into the RPG section. *Black Flag*, for example, had a very good play time, which was supported by the progression you could invest both in Edward and in the *Jackdaw*. Then we looked at the narrative. We made the narrative evolve from a story—from stories and missions, basically—to quests. That was also enormous transformation."

Changing the combat mechanics might not seem like much to some players, but from a development standpoint, it was a huge alteration. The system moved from being governed by animations to hitboxes.

"Fighting had become very old," Guesdon says. "We had received a lot of criticism about the redundancies in the combat system and the fact that it wasn't allowing

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for much player progression. Once you knew how to counterattack, that was pretty much it.

"Ever since the first *Assassin's Creed*, the game's fights had really been animation driven. We had some very cool animations with a lot of attention paid to the contact, the inertia, the hit, which made for some very cool slow-mo trailers. But in terms of player experience, a lot of games had come out since the first *Assassin's Creed* that had more dynamic and responsive combat systems."

Moving to a hitbox-based combat system required a huge amount of work, but it also required a massive change in mentality for the developers working on *Origins.* "We needed to refresh combat, but that was a big shift because this time it meant that it wouldn't be animation driven anymore. Instead, it would be more code driven and reactive," Guesdon says.

"We had to make a lot of changes to allow an animation to end whenever the player decided to do something else. We also had to accept the fact that it would look less realistic in a way. This mindset and cultural shift were big things, not only technologically speaking, but for all the team because some members had carefully been doing animation for ten years and making these as realistic as possible. Now, all of a sudden, we were telling them that the fun and the reactiveness of the inputs was more important than them not clipping."

The introduction of more RPG mechanics, such as deeper customization and crafting, gave greater depth to the world. It also provided a way for the developers to gate off content in the world of *Origins.* Previously, players would simply be told that they couldn't go into an area by means of an obvious wall. With this game, keeping players in specific areas would be much more organic.

"In *Origins* you could go wherever you wanted to from the very beginning, but we needed to make sure that the player would at some point be in a city to witness some of the major events of the main narrative," Azaïzia says. "So, we introduced what we called soft-gating: if you were in an area that you weren't supposed to be in, enemies would be way too strong for you. That's a way of showcasing that you weren't strong enough and that you needed to upgrade your character, do a couple of quests, or spend some time in the other regions of the world before getting there.

"By changing the formula that was in the very beginning of earlier *Assassin's Creed* games, I'd say that the invisible wall was now very visible."

HOW THE WORLD WORKS

The other seismic change to the *Assassin's Creed* formula was in how the development team approached creating *Origins*' world. This entry in the series did away with the urban design of *Unity* and *Syndicate*, instead building upon the worlds of *Assassin's Creed III* and *Black Flag.*

One way that the crew managed to make the game's setting feel alive was with what it called the Meta AI. This was actually developed in parallel with another feature: the eagle.

Due to the game's setting, the team initially wanted to have the protagonist, Bayek, use this bird of prey to scout out the world rather than relying on the syncing system of previous games.

"There weren't tons of super-tall buildings in Egypt that players could use to see how the world worked," Azaïzia says. "That's why the team decided to introduce the eagle mechanic, which you can send up and which acted like a drone. Players were able to see their surroundings from a long way away and they could see characters moving or a hippopotamus attacking someone. Basically, the players could see the world from another point of view, akin to a godlike game. That's how a lot of features and other things were connected organically to one another. It was showcasing that world, that system, and the world was at the core of the whole creation. And then it was about being legitimate and respecting the franchise."

While the team had found a novel solution to the syncing problem, they worried that from an aerial perspective the world of *Origins* ran the risk of looking too empty and lifeless.

"We were in a massive country and we wanted to make it even more alive than before," Guesdon explains. "It needed to be even more credible a setting so as to give the player even more opportunities. We came up with this idea of the eagle allowing you to see the world at a large scale. But when you did that, you were able to see a long way into the distance. In order to maintain the illusion that

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the player even more opportunities. We came up with this idea of the eagle allowing you to see the world at a large scale. But when you did that, you were able to see a long way into the distance. In order to maintain the illusion that the world was alive, the player needed to believe in the motions of these entities that are supposed to be alive.

"With the old system—and most games are still using this—there was a kind of bubble where NPCs, like humans, animals, or whatever, are actually living just around the player, because we couldn't compute thousands of these entities filling the map. With the eagle, we actually see a long way off. We couldn't have the NPCs just doing nothing, because it would break the immersion."

The way the Meta AI worked was that NPCs could effectively be in two different modes depending on how far away they were from the player.

"When they were further away, an entity was reduced to its basic health points, had an agenda, and moved around the world. It looked believable enough," Guesdon explains. "For example, if there was a lion far away from the player, all that the lion knew in-game was that it was a lion, it was in good health, and it would just be roaming the world. If it had passed by an antelope, it would have probably gone and attacked it."

"When the player got closer, then we would have the full AI load with all the reactions and animations and so on. If you were close to that lion, it would probably attack you because the full AI, with all the reactions, had loaded."

Not only was the Meta AI used to provide a sense of vibrancy to the world of *Origins*, it also tied into some of the game's missions. Even little things like quest givers not just remaining in the same place gave the sense that

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there, and would always be in that place. With this AI, we could have people actually roaming the world; you had to find them so that they could give you a mission or quest or whatever.

"Everything was tied into the Meta AI. Seeing the mission giver moving in the world was for me a big win and it reinforced the fact that the world was really living, no matter if you were there or not."

Azaïzia adds, "We said that all the nonplayable characters would have an agenda whether the player is there or not. They're going to be doing something; they're going to hunt or go on missions. If the player accepts one particular mission, the game will say that you have to hunt down a target around an area of the city. However, the target's objective is to report in the north of Egypt, and then to go to Rome. Depending on where you choose to attack, you'll see that the character is at a different place on the map, or that he can even leave and you'll end up missing the target because he's got his own agenda and his own life. We thought that would create interesting anecdotes and moments where every player doesn't have the same experience because there are a lot of things that are out of their control."

The Meta AI system also introduced some rather interesting gameplay mechanics, such as how players tackled enemy locations.

"Everything is dynamic. You can follow NPCs around. They work in the field, they sleep, they eat. They even pee," Lozanov laughs. "There are some specific sites, such as military locations, where if you observe an area long enough, you'll see specific spots where guards go to relieve themselves. You can use this information to your advantage and catch them off guard."

This was a wildly ambitious mechanic to introduce into the game, one that required a lot of hard technical work. This is part of the reason why it was only available in a few missions within *Origins*.

"We didn't have a lot of quests using this because basically everything was developed in tandem," Guesdon admits. "So, you never know it works until it actually works. We cannot put all our eggs in the same basket and say all our missions or quests will use this system."

Still, Guesdon is proud of the work that the team put into creating these systems together, not least because it was an organic innovation that the developers came up with themselves.

"The eagle came about after some programmers prototyped it. The other major development came from people saying we should use a minimalistic real-time strategy game AI when at a larger scale," Guesdon says. "The beauty was in taking all these ingredients and putting them together into something which was coherent, which made sense, and where every part actually reinforced the whole."

BACK TO THE START

It took the team some time to land on who the protagonist of *Assassin's Creed Origins* was going to be. Mostly this came down to making sure that whatever character starred in the title made sense within the context of its gameplay. Eventually, they settled on Bayek, a member of the Medjay, which was essentially a desert police force.

"Bayek was a hard one to pull off, much harder than Edward Kenway," Guesdon says.

"It was much easier for Edward because there was the pirate fantasy element. With Bayek we struggled for a long time with the question of who he was and what he was doing. The difficulty when you are creating an open world is always in trying to reduce this ludonarrative dissonance.[1] You want to tell a story, but the player can do only certain types of actions."

As always, what Bayek was going to be doing was exploring a huge open world . . . as well as getting into fights.

"Why would you have this character fight?" Guesdon says. "It's never easy to create a motivation in the first place that involves the character seeking vengeance while they're doing good things. You end up with very few options that will justify such behavior. For Bayek, because he is a Medjay, which was this old kingdom cult that was sent by the pharaoh, this means he won't be recognizable to your enemies. On the other hand, you want him to be recognizable in a positive way by members of the public who might want to ask him for help. That was the tricky part."

Bayek was never created as the solo main character of the *Assassin's Creed Origins* story; he was always part of a larger narrative involving his partner, Aya.

"Aya was always in the mix, but not always in the same role," Guesdon explains. "To start with they were just friends who had been exiled. Then we had to reshuffle the stories to make this relationship stronger, so we made them a married couple that had lost their son."

Beadle adds, "Bayek and Aya were just a real couple. That felt refreshing. They were a family, and it felt like he was very human in so many ways even though he was still obviously a badass. Some of the other characters and *Assassin's Creed* protagonists came across as super-heroes. They were a bit standoffish and unrelatable. But Bayek felt like someone I could actually know."

1 "Ludonarrative dissonance" describes a difference between what is happening in gameplay and what is occurring in the narrative. For example, the protagonist is against violence in all of the cutscenes but is then gleefully mowing down foes in gameplay.

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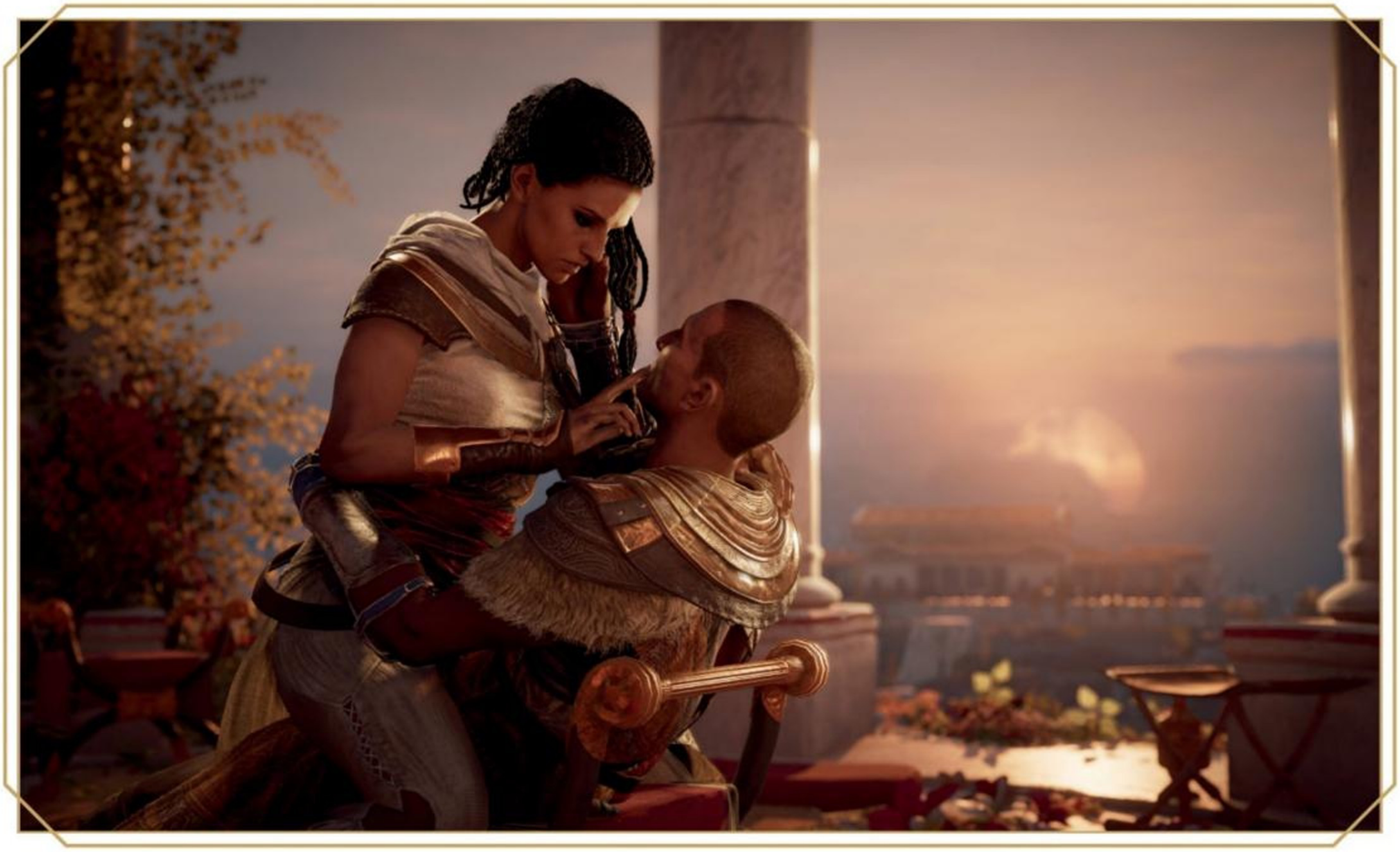

"BAYEK WAS NEVER CREATED AS THE SOLO MAIN CHARACTER OF THE *ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS* STORY; HE WAS ALWAYS PART OF A LARGER NARRATIVE INVOLVING HIS PARTNER, AYA."

For the team it was vital that the main character was not only Egyptian, but also someone who was in touch with the older ideals of a country that had suffered successive invasions from foreign powers, like the Greeks and Romans.

"We wanted Bayek to represent this Egypt that was actually fading away," Guesdon says. "There were some very interesting stories to be told about the transmission of heritage, of culture, of religion, what you believe, and so on. *Origins* was also the first game set in a polytheistic setting, which opened up a lot of opportunities, but at the same time, we weren't used to that. There were a lot of challenges. In the end, I think we managed to make him an adult suffering from the death of his son, fighting while dealing with this big loss, and actually not knowing exactly who he was fighting for."

In some ways, Bayek was like Ezio, and trying to find his place in a world in the wake of tragedy. But in contrast to the franchise's Italian Renaissance hero, Bayek was already a capable fighter.

"Ezio was living the good life before that was taken from him," Guesdon says. "*Assassin's Creed II* was really about him building himself up. Bayek is already a grownup and now he has to struggle with the fact that he thought he had everything in his life, his family, and so on, but now it's gone. He's not sure how the world is evolving with this new Greek queen, with the Romans arriving. It's a lot to process."

Of course, the story of Bayek and Aya is about more than them seeking revenge after the death of their son at the hand of the Order of the Ancients. Their pain is transformative and it would go on to have widespread ripples across the world of *Assassin's Creed*.

"There is this very touching and moving love story between Bayek and Aya where they know they won't ever get their old lives back. Their family is gone, it's over," Guesdon explains.

"They need to move past that. But at the same time, they decide consciously that because their first creation, their son, has died, they want to create something that

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will ideally last for a very long time. That's the Hidden Ones, the organization that would eventually become the Assassin Brotherhood.

"In the end I think fans liked the story because it showed that this group of people was born out of pain, sadness, and sorrow. But for me this really embodied what an Assassin believes: they can live through hard times but manage to transform that into something positive for others."

This tied into a broader conversation that was happening at Ubisoft about the time period. How could an *Assassin's Creed* game feature Assassins long before the Brotherhood was actually founded?

"A lot of people came to me the same way they had come to me asking how we were going to do an *Assassin's Creed* pirate game," Guesdon laughs. "They came to me saying, 'How can we have an *Assassin's Creed* game one thousand years before the Assassins actually exist?' But, like in *Black Flag*, the series focuses on this never-ending tension between free will and order. Within this framework, we can create many stories. And we set out to tell the story of the genesis of the Brotherhood in *Origins*.

"The Hidden Ones were linked to Amun, the Egyptian god, which meant the hidden one was everywhere but nobody saw him. And so, when you take all these ingredients and you work on them and you think them through, you are able to come up with things that make total sense."

Though *Origins* was set over one thousand years before the events of the first *Assassin's Creed*, Guesdon felt it was important to make sure that the game felt linked to the overall franchise.

"The most important angle to consider, in order to make sure it was still an *AC* game, was the narrative," Guesdon explains. "I made some presentations about using the feather like Altaïr. We explained the cut fingers as the result of the hidden blade. We chose to have Bayek wear a hood, but it was missing the peak. Overall, there was a feeling that this was the first time we were returning to a Middle Eastern, North African setting,

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which was also creating this connection with the first *Assassin's Creed*."

As well as a fresh take on the historical aspect of *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft changed things up with the game's modern framing, too. Since *Assassin's Creed III* and the death of Desmond, there hadn't really been a main character for this part of the franchise.

Black Flag had seen players taking on the role of an anonymous Abstergo employee. Similarly, *Unity* and *Syndicate* didn't give the modern-day character any kind of an identity either. Those modern-day sections for these two games were intended to tie in to the Initiates platform—the player was meant to be the contemporary character viewing historical memories via the Animus.

This changed with *Origins*, which once again had players taking on the role of a specific present-day protagonist.

"At some point you need to acknowledge what is going well and what is not going well," Guesdon says. "With *Unity* and *Syndicate*, we had wanted the player to be this character that was fully integrated with Initiates. In the end, we really had to acknowledge the fact that it didn't work as well as expected. Our really hardcore fans were into it, but we realized that very few players actually understood the whole thing. Without this global vision of the universe that we were proposing, it no longer made much sense. At some point you just have to ask who you are playing as."

This time around players were taking on the role of Layla Hassan, an Egyptian Templar turned Assassin. If nothing else, she was created to be more of a character than the blank slate that Desmond was. Layla has much more of a say in what happens to her.

"Desmond was pretty much a victim," Guesdon says. "He was just trying to understand what was happening. With Layla, we brought in a new character who is very driven and who is actively acting against the will of her employer.

"It's almost like she's representing us as developers—we have the tech, we can do whatever we want, and we can even bend previously established rules. We wanted Layla to be a hero who is into the hard sciences.

"There was this connection with modern Egypt, because that's something quite distinct to ancient Egypt. Today's Arabic Egyptians have different beliefs and cultural practices from the ancient Egyptians. But they still represent their roots. So much has happened along Egypt's historical path. What is presented in *Origins* isn't necessarily directly connected, but there are still connections. Layla, being Egyptian, allowed us to explore those ideas."

MODERN PROBLEMS

At the time, *Origins* had the oldest setting for an *Assassin's Creed* game. With previous entries in the franchise being set progressively closer to the present day there were some notable advantages. These included having greater research and more information available about a specific era. But it also meant less freedom to insert the series' revisionist history, as well as limiting players' actions.

"It was becoming a little bit challenging with guns becoming more prevalent the nearer to the present day we reached," Luhe says. "*Assassin's Creed* and guns do not fit well together in some of the gameplay. When we did have guns, they were always capable of just one or two shots. We never had an assault rifle or anything like that."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, going back to the Egyptian period required a great deal of research, not least because the events of *Origins* take place 2,066 years before its 2017 release.

For Durand, part of the challenge in how the game would represent Egypt in the period was in separating reality from a lot of the mystery and mythology that surround the civilization.

"One of the big, big risks is that there's a lot of passion regarding ancient Egypt that's based around mystery," he explains. "As a historian, that's attractive to use. People go and study Egypt because it's so far away and foreign. Of course, in reality, it's humankind. There are always mythological aspects that are invented by humans, but they're unique to ancient Egypt so I think that was interesting."

One of the other challenges when it came to the time period was the landmarks and how they would be portrayed within *Origins*.

"Most of the locations that the team wanted to depict, even at the time of Queen Cleopatra, had long since disappeared," Durand says. "There's a lot of fantasy around them. From the very start we knew we were going to do the pyramids. That was a no-brainer. But even then, there were a lot of discussions about the way that we would depict them. Were we going to produce them faithfully—that is to say, as faithfully as possible—or were we going to go in and bring a lot of fantasy to these elements? Would the pyramids lead to underground tunnels and First Civilization aspects? That technically would make a lot of sense in *Assassin's Creed* games, but at the same time, maybe it would have been too obvious or it may have diminished the value of these monuments for what they really are, which is just very big tombs."

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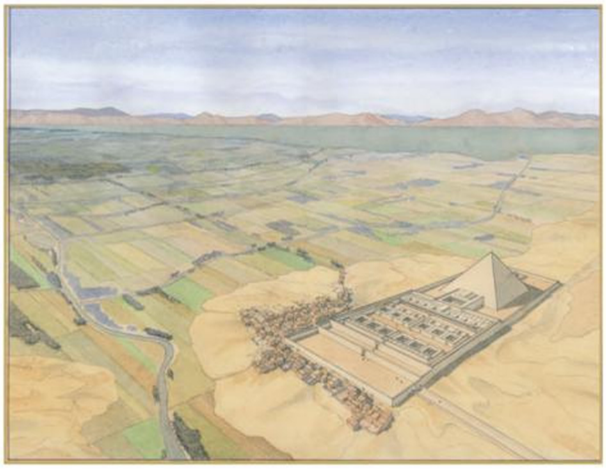

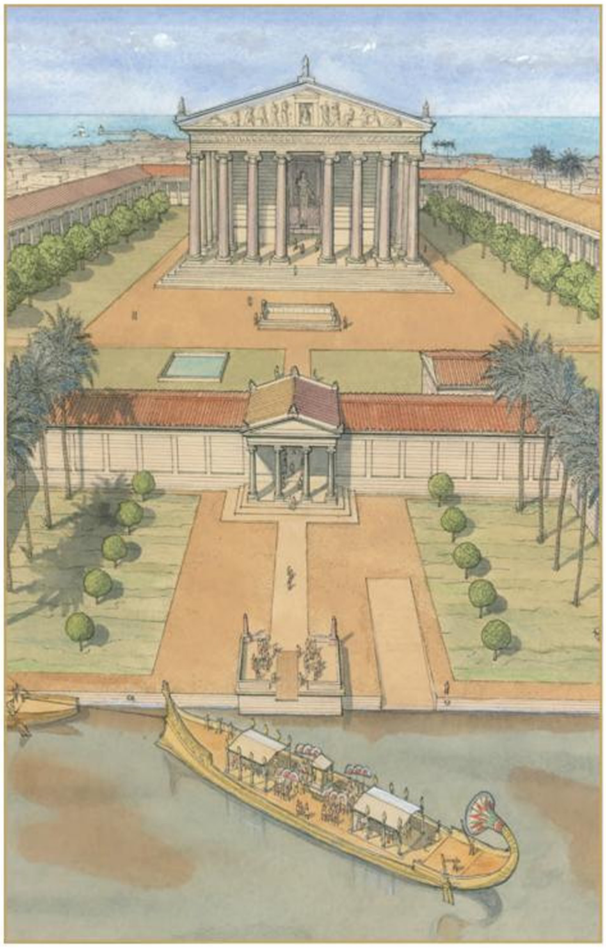

With *Origins*, the way the team approached the real-life historical setting of the game was more about authenticity than accuracy, simply because it was so long ago that a lot of guesswork was involved.

"My perception on this has evolved after working with these games," Durand says. "The further we go back in time, the more we're trying to achieve authenticity, a sense of immersion, than trying to reach for accuracy. For me on a day-to-day basis in terms of research, it didn't change anything. It's really more the way that the team is going to work with the material that makes a difference.

"For example, the city of Memphis. It's almost vanished into oblivion today in terms of archaeological reports. But we had some information and descriptions of the city. There was a little bit of archaeology, and this is why I think it was very interesting for the team to work with archaeologists and with Jean-Claude Golvin, who made these archaeological plans and paintings to help the group envision a possible past.

"Instead of relying on the team to invent stuff, I think it was very interesting that they wanted to be inspired by what was believable as a view of the past. Personally, I think I did more and better research than I had done previously because I knew that we were working on a Discovery Tour project simultaneously. I knew that we would bring everything to light. I think for the rest of the team, it didn't make a big difference. But for me, it added even more weight because I wanted to make sure that what we were going to do was justified."

As always, the crew planned to head out to Egypt to gather reference materials for *Origins*. However, growing conflict and general unrest in the region led to them having to cancel these plans.

"Jean and the other directors on the project looked into going to Egypt, and were told that we would need a bodyguard for every person," Luhe says. "It would have been a ridiculous amount of overhead, a huge cost. So, in the end it was decided that it wasn't feasible."

That being said, the events of the game were so far in the past that Durand didn't believe that a research trip was vital for creating *Origins*.

"Even going to Egypt would not have provided us with information regarding the city of Memphis or most of the cities that we were producing in the game, because they don't exist anymore," he laughs.

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"I'm not saying it was valueless. It would have been very valuable to go there, but the logistics and resources that it would have taken to get our team there were probably better used in hiring these anthropologists, archaeologists, and specialists who helped us to make it right."

One of the central sources of information was Jean-Claude Golvin, a French researcher, archaeologist, and architect who also happens to be an illustrator.

"He did a ton of watercolors for us, drawing a lot of inspiration not only from his scientific knowledge but also from his skill as an artist. He helped us with problem-solving through his sketches and paintings," Lacoste says. "That was really cool and inspiring."

One of the other ways that the team came up with the world for *Origins* was to just think about what it must have been like for people to live in this part of the world at that point in time, staring up at the pyramids and other landmarks in the region.

"When we brought to life these different cities and the pyramids, it was important to put ourselves in the shoes of the people living there," Lacoste says. "We tried to envision someone who was living in the countryside and harvesting wheat. They would see these huge pyramids in the distance as simple shapes reflecting the sunlight. That must have been incredibly amazing. We wanted to make sure that the player could see that as they play the game. To not only see the version of the pyramids we can see today, but to travel in time to what they were like then. That's really the fantasy of the time machine, I think.

"Just putting yourself in the shoes of these people, imagining what it was like for someone seeing the Lighthouse of Alexandria for the first time—something that was 134 meters high. That's like us seeing the Burj Khalifa in Dubai today and it's preposterous because this was over two thousand years ago."

Much of the work done on the pyramids was handled by Ubisoft's Sofia studio.

"We spent a lot of time imagining and researching the whole fantasy around the pyramids and what they could have been like at the time," Lozanov says.

"It was an enormous mandate for the studio. And the pyramids were huge, too; we wanted to have a one-to-one scale for them. That means that the footprint of the pyramid has the same surface area as New York City and New Orleans from *Liberation* did in terms of scale."

> "WE SPENT A LOT OF TIME IMAGINING AND RESEARCHING THE WHOLE FANTASY AROUND THE PYRAMIDS AND WHAT THEY COULD HAVE BEEN LIKE AT THE TIME."

The *Origins* team also used Google Maps in lieu of heading out to Egypt to gather research materials. Of course, the landscape is rather different now to how it was over two millennia ago.

"A lot has changed in the last two thousand years," Luhe says. "Especially with irrigation and modern farming, the amount of water they would have had back then compared to now is very different. For example, the lake that the Singapore team made in Faiyum is a lot smaller now on Google Maps than it was back then. That's just part of where we're at with irrigation and climate change in those parts of the world."

One of the challenges that Durand found was translating what the team found in research texts—and re-creating that in a video game—because, well, what was written about the period just hasn't stood the test of time.

"For instance, there's this book that we used regarding the Siege of Alexandria," he explains. "Julius Caesar went to Egypt for political reasons and he was stuck in Alexandria. He wrote an account of what happened, but when we look at the accounts that he wrote, or which someone wrote on his behalf, there are missing elements. A lot of historians have worked on these records without seeing what Alexandria looked like, without having access to the archaeological information that we have access to today.

"It was wonderful to be in the twenty-first century and have access to this information so that we could see—for instance—how the city of Alexandria was built in reality compared to the descriptions that were made by earlier historians. Because we were making a game, we were motivated to find that information, so we had to put it into context. Working on ancient Egypt is where I've learned the most so far."

NEGATIVE SPACE

While the team wanted to create a world full of content that people would spend a lot of time playing with, they

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were also wary of saturating *Origins*' setting with too many things to do.

"We didn't want to bring to life a world that looked too much like an amusement park, where everything is so close together," Lacoste explains. "You want to feel this negative space and open lands. For instance, there's a nice transition between the Giza Plateau and Alexandria, where you travel to sea. There's this sense of traveling through time by employing this negative space. We have these moments of journeying between different important hubs in the story and also in the gameplay."

One of the ways that this feeling of negative space was created was with deserts within *Origins*. These weren't just barren wastes of sand dunes, and they actually came with some interesting gameplay mechanics.

"We developed what we called the desert overheat system," Lozanov explains. "When you're overexposed to heat in the desert, you start to hallucinate because of the lack of water and being overheated. We used it as a gameplay system in places to create an experience of being in the desert.

"We need to have some open spaces for the game to breathe, so it's not only intense gameplay sequences or intense environments. We needed a place in between these open spaces where you take a breath as a player, enjoy the scenery, prepare for your next journey, etc., and the desert gave us this. It was naturally a place to have a calmer experience."

The team wasn't aiming for a photorealistic aesthetic in *Origins*. While it had inherited an impressive lighting system from *Assassin's Creed Unity*, the team still wanted to have a stylized visual direction for the game.

"We didn't aim for the pure photographic visual direction; we wanted something that was more pencilly and which resembled nineteenth-century paintings," Lacoste says. "We felt like it was more sensual, interesting, and artistic. We found a balance between what we called the DVR-based rendering and also this kind of stylization with color correction."

Though the crew wasn't targeting aesthetic realism for most of the game's design, there was one area where they aimed for realism: lighting. The team ended up consulting NASA tech documentation to better understand how lighting worked.

"We wanted to make sure that every single biome had a unique atmosphere and lighting," Lacoste explains. "To do this we used this interesting time-of-day evolution of the sun in the sky, which would lead to the atmosphere and also the actual air density. So there would be a difference from the drier Qattara Depression to the Nile delta, where we wanted the player to feel the humidity and have a very different sense of light coming through the shadows. That would also help the player feel like they were almost living in different places within the same country."

Once again, Ubisoft Singapore was brought in to work on the water tech. The studio was tasked with handling the Faiyum region, which includes two lakes, Mareotis and Faiyum.

Singapore also handled naval gameplay for *Origins*. Given the vast difference in the time period, this was a very different experience to what they had previously created for *Assassin's Creed III*, *Black Flag*, and *Rogue*.

"This was before the era of cannonballs, so it was all about shooting flaming arrows and firebombs," Luhe says. "There was also a lot of ramming into other boats."

The introduction of the Meta AI in *Origins* was a challenge for the entire team, but nowhere was this felt more keenly than at Ubisoft Singapore.

"Although we did lots of simulations that were much more advanced on *Origins*, we first focused on the water," Luhe says. "But it's almost harder on water—you can't see people walking around a town from a great distance. However, you can see forty- or sixty-meter triremes going around their daily routines, because obviously they're much more visible. We couldn't do a technical shortcut to teleport or despawn them or anything because it would have been massively obvious."

VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

The desire to make an educational component of *Assassin's Creed* goes all the way back to *Assassin's Creed II* at least. Ubisoft had previously leveraged its historical research with the Animus Database—a codex that detailed elements of the time period.

But *Origins* was the first entry in the franchise to fully follow through with this promise with Discovery Tour. Released in February 2018, after the title's release, it allowed players to roam the game's world in a series of guided tours that showcased the history of the time. This started as a personal project for Maxime Durand almost four years earlier.

"After *Assassin's Creed Unity* launched in 2014, I realized that we had to do something with these games to make them available for more audiences, for teachers, for museums," he explains.

"We'd been trying to do partnerships. We had these testimonies of teachers. I personally was motivated as a historian to bring that into classrooms. I started

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building a project with the execs at Ubisoft to get some funding on doing an educational mode for the series. I knew that it was going to be challenging."

One of the higher-ups that Durand ended up speaking to was Jean Guesdon, who was instrumental in convincing Ubisoft to give Discovery Tour the green light. From there the team just had to figure out exactly what they wanted to do with this project. Not only was this designed to be used in an educational capacity, it needed to be as widely available as possible.

"We created the guided tours at first and then removed the violence from the game, as these were the two most important objectives," Durand explains.

"We also knew that other challenges we would face was the accessibility of the product. Most teachers were not going to use consoles. They would be using Chromebooks, which we knew were not powerful enough to run the game. We were aware that streaming devices were coming, but these would be after our release."

There was also the small matter of just what users would be able to do in Discovery Tour.

"How artifacts are integrated into game environments is important. I remember showing one specific museum the state of *Assassin's Creed Origins* at the time. The player could destroy pots and tombs," Durand laughs. "I remember the museum creators were frightened, wondering why we would allow the player to destroy these artifacts.

"What we allow players to do in a typical game and what is allowed normally in a museum are very different."

EXTRA TIME

As work continued on *Origins*, the development team asked Ubisoft's Paris headquarters for another year to work on the game. This was the first time since 2009 that *Assassin's Creed* had not been released annually.

"We said we needed an extra year to polish the game so it would be a solid experience," Azaïzia says. "We told them it was going to be costly; it would be an expensive year and an expensive game. But if our ambition was to reboot the franchise and to come up with a fresh game, then that was what we needed."

Ubisoft was willing to give the team another year because it allowed a bit of space for players too.

"HQ really got the message and they were okay with us taking the time that was needed. After *Syndicate* they understood that *Assassin's Creed* doesn't need to be an annual franchise. It was okay to let the franchise breathe in between releases."

One reason why Ubisoft management might have been okay with not having an *Assassin's Creed* game to launch in 2016 was the fact that it had *Watch Dogs 2* releasing at the end of that year. Perhaps that game would fill the open-world gap left by *Assassin's Creed*. The fact that the *Assassin's Creed* film was launching that same year might have helped as well.

"We knew that the movie could give us an extra year where the brand would be really strong," Azaïzia explains. "The brand would reach new territories and audiences with the film. We would have a lot of business opportunities. We were able to focus our marketing efforts on the movie before coming back to *Origins* the following year."

Following its October 2017 launch, *Origins* was overwhelmingly praised, not only for the changes that the Montréal team had made to the *Assassin's Creed* formula, but also for its visuals and historical accuracy. Sales in the title's first ten days were double those of *Syndicate*. *Origins* would go on to sell over ten million copies by March 2020.

In short, the gamble had paid off. Giving the team the leeway to reinvent the franchise while also giving them an extra year for development had yielded huge rewards for Ubisoft.

Now, it was time to press the point.

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THE CURSE OF THE PHARAOHS

While *Assassin's Creed Origins* leaned heavily into the historical reality of Egyptian life during the Ptolemaic dynasty, Ubisoft Sofia wanted to explore more of the spiritual and mythical elements of this period in the *Curse of the Pharaohs* expansion.

Set four years after *Origins*, the game saw Bayek heading to the Valley of the Kings in Thebes to investigate reports of a mystical artifact in the area—one that will be very familiar to fans of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise.

"We didn't want to do a fantasy adventure game. We wanted something grounded in our lore, something that only *Assassin's Creed* could do," Lozanov explains. "In the codex pages that Ezio was collecting, Altaïr wrote that one of the features of the Apple of Eden is to manipulate your mind and make you think that you'll get what you want. It creates an illusion. So, we used this as one of the tools to create these mythical people. Basically, we projected the beliefs of people into reality, creating an artificial reality."

Because of the Apple of Eden's power—and Bayek's belief in the mythology of the period—these mystical deities could appear to come to life and haunt our protagonist.

"People forget that *Assassin's Creed* is actually a sci-fi game," Lozanov says. "We have the Animus, which is pretty much a virtual reality projection. There are layers of reality, like in *Inception*. The Apple of Eden shares this power to project the beliefs of people, and people believe that the pharaohs are their gods. They believe that Atum is the sun, Amun is the sun god, and all the rest. They made etchings of these gods on the walls of the pyramids and wrote the stories. All these beliefs are actually from the Apple of Eden—it basically projects these beliefs around you.

"It was a mixture of the earlier beliefs of Egyptians, which we spent a lot of time researching in order to get them right. We wanted to be respectful to the culture, and to glean all the nuances and ideas there without butchering or oversimplifying them. Then we projected our lore onto it to create it as a game."

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MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

In 2018, the exhibition *Queens of Egypt* was created at the Pointe-à-Callière Museum in Montréal. It called on the teams from *Assassin's Creed Origins* and Discovery Tour to offer an immersive experience through monumental projections inspired by *Origins'* environments, created exclusively for this project. In scenes from the sumptuous and palatial seat of the pharaoh's power, the arid and mysterious western desert, the houses and streets of a bustling village, and the daily lives of women in power, visitors were able to discover carefully created and accurate visual portrayals of life in Egypt at this time. *Queens of Egypt* went on to be adapted for the much larger spaces of the Canadian Museum of History in 2021.

The collaboration between the Pointe-à-Callière Museum and Ubisoft was renewed in 2022 with the exhibition *Vikings: Dragons of the Northern Seas*, which welcomed more than 325,000 people. This time, visitors were able to experience the real *and* mythical worlds of the Vikings through an immersive journey told in four great tales: the tale of origins, of life, of travel, and of the end of days—all through a breathtaking exhibition punctuated with images from *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*. "We are so proud to see our games used in classrooms and being presented in exhibitions all around the world, serving to explore history," says Maxime Durand.

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ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

Having proven itself with the variety of DLC it had worked on in the past—as well as 2015's *Syndicate*—Ubisoft Québec was chosen to lead whatever project followed *Assassin's Creed Origins*.

As mentioned earlier, the initial plan for *Origins* was to cover the entire Mediterranean basin. Limitations—both technical and timewise—meant that this wasn't possible. So, the project was split up: Montréal would work on a game centered around Egypt, while Québec would develop a project that focused on Greece at around the same time.

This soon changed, with Québec proposing a game that was set further back in the past.

"We were asking ourselves what it made sense to build after *Origins*," Côté explains. "There was a lot of interest in going back to the foundation of Western society with the Greek philosophers. Obviously, we were in the Mediterranean with *Origins*, but one of the things that was very important for the team—and I remember there being a bit of friction around that—was we didn't want to build a direct sequel to *Origins*."

Initially *Origins* was going to center on Cleopatra and Caesar in Egypt, while a potential follow-up was going to be about Cleopatra and Mark Antony in Greece. The Québec team had different ideas.

"What we had found in the past is that it's very, very difficult in terms of production to have two projects that are so codependent storywise and scriptwise back to back," Côté explains.

"If you recall, *Odyssey* came out about eleven months after *Origins*. It's tricky to go into full-fledged production if you're building a direct sequel when the other game isn't even finished yet, because anything can happen. *Origins* went from being about the entire Mediterranean basin to then just Egypt and to then a smaller part of Egypt. If you're planning out a monstrous sequel to a monstrous game, it's very tough. That's why we wanted more independence, which is

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something that we keep in mind going forward to make sure that our teams don't have hard constraints coming from the team before them. That way the second team can start production sooner and build higher-quality games.

"We came to 450 BC Greece both out of production needs and the creative desire to explore the origins of the philosophical foundation of our Western society."

There is something quite funny about the *Assassin's Creed* franchise having gone back thousands of years for its *Origins* story, only for the game that immediately followed it to be set even further in the past.

"You should have seen the discussion about that. Some were asking, 'Should we call it *Origins' Origin*?'" Côté laughs.

"We spent so much time discussing this and determining how we would make it understandable. On the face of it, it didn't make sense, but I think what people cared more about was that *Odyssey* was an excellent game and a worthy entry in the franchise."

Much like *Origins*, the team had to work out how to tie the game to the *Assassin's Creed* series. *Odyssey* was set before the birth of the Assassin Brotherhood, but—as always—there were greater thematic connections that ran through the franchise, which helped the Québec studio out.

"We did find ways to tie it to the overall lore of the franchise. Obviously, yes, it's before there were Assassins, so it's not the history of how the Assassins came to be," Côté says. "But this conflict between chaos and order is universal in a way. For me, one of the overarching themes of *Assassin's Creed*—perhaps even more important than control versus free will—is that we've nearly always told stories about family. *Syndicate* is the story of a brother and a sister. *Unity* is all about your heritage and what you need to do to disconnect from the reputation that you inherited from your parents. Both the Kenway Saga and the Ezio Trilogy are about family."

PLAYING THE ROLE

As has been the case, *Odyssey* was built upon the foundation that *Origins* had laid out in 2017. The RPG elements that were introduced in the earlier project were something that the Québec studio had been interested in for quite some time. Now these elements had their time to shine.

This included dialogue choices that allowed players to better express themselves within the game.

"This was something that the team really wanted to do. Some of these ideas dated back from what we were doing back on *Assassin's Creed III*," Côté says.

"I remember pitching to Alex Hutchinson, who was creative director back on *Assassin's Creed III*, the idea of adding a dialogue system in the Homestead so that we could add more depth to Connor. Obviously, that would have been way too early and it would have been too much of a technological endeavor at that point to undertake. But we came back to it on *Odyssey*."

The decision to lean into RPG mechanics was partly due to the team's passion for these kinds of games. Still, there were some other very good reasons.

"I think there was a recognition in the industry that players would engage more with games that promoted autonomy, relatedness, and competence over time," Côté explains. "RPGs are really well suited to that. As we've improved on these elements over time, one of the things that we've noticed is that people became more engaged in the franchise. We've seen huge increases in terms of player engagement on our past *Assassin's Creed* games. People get more involved in our universe."

Competency could be achieved organically as the player experienced the game, but how would the pillars of autonomy and relatedness be represented?

"There are two big pillars to increasing relatedness which we wanted to provide to players," Côté explains. "The first one was being able to choose between [the protagonists] Kassandra and Alexios. It's about relatedness and representation. We wanted players to choose an avatar that felt more like them.

"The other aspect of it was to give players more agency and autonomy in the moment-to-moment decisions that they could make. You have a branching narrative that impacts the outcome of the game. Dialogue choices might not have changed anything at the moment-to-moment gameplay, but how you reacted to a character talking to you—aggressively, passively, or if you ignored them altogether—that improved your relationship with the game. You felt more engaged with the experience. We were strong believers in that model, and all of the investment that we did, in terms of building new gameplay or narratives, was to improve upon this."

All of this was new to the *Assassin's Creed* franchise both on a feature level but also on a technical one, too. The Québec team had to create new tools from scratch in order to support its vision.

"We had around thirty hours of dialogue in the game," Dansereau explains.

"That's the equivalent of a lot of movies, if you want to think about it that way. There was no way that we

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"MOST PEOPLE TEND TO FORGET, BUT *ASSASSIN'S CREED II* ALREADY HAD WEAPONS AND ARMOR WITH STATISTICS. *ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY* ALREADY HAD A LEVEL SYSTEM."

could have produced thirty hours of gameplay the old way we made games, so we had to invent a dialogue editor. This was a tool that automatically placed cameras in a scene based on the script. It also generated facial expressions in our characters based on different emotions that the design could play with. You would very quickly end up with a great-looking scene without having to go through mo-cap and all the traditional ways of doing dialogue or cinematics.

"That goes back to Québec having a strong programming support and 3D programmers who created tools to help us deliver a game that had a huge amount of data. We had basically the same time to do *Odyssey* that we did for *Syndicate*. But then the amount of content was triple what was in *Syndicate*, if not more."

Within Ubisoft, there were some concerns about the RPG-centric vision that Québec had for *Odyssey*. But at the same time, this was a shift that the entire game industry had been going through for years.

"It's still an ongoing topic, even today," Azaïzia says. "We're still discussing how much of an RPG our games should or could be. It's a bit weird because most games have turned into RPGs; this isn't something new for games. If you look at *Gran Turismo* on the original PlayStation, it was literally a driving game that had tons of RPG elements. Instead of traditional levels, players would have to pass a license-testing system. Instead of being granted new equipment at regular intervals, players would have to win races in order to upgrade their cars.

"Even in a game like *God of War*, the player was gathering materials and crafting. It felt like a natural path for *Assassin's Creed* because it increases engagement; people spend more time in the game.

"Most people tend to forget, but *Assassin's Creed II* already had weapons and armor with statistics. *Assassin's Creed Unity* already had a level system."

As the game's reveal approached, the PR team started trying to figure out how they would announce the project—was this just going to be a trailer, or would there be anything that members of the media could play to preview *Odyssey*?

"The team said the game would be playable when it was announced," Beadle laughs. "I was like, 'Holy cow,

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really?' They had between four and six hours ready to be played. So right there and then we played a few hours at the studio.

"We decided that the plan for the reveal was to have four hours of gameplay. We would outline what the media could write about; there were certain parts that weren't quite finished or that contained spoilers. I really wanted journalists to walk out of that first reveal and say without a doubt that this is a full RPG game.

"That strategy paid off in such a huge way. It convinced the journalists. It reassured the dev team of what they had, which was exciting."

Part of the reason why the crew had so much of the game ready so early was due to them being entirely aware of how big *Odyssey* was compared to anything else they had worked on in the past.

"They scoped and planned it out very, very well," Beadle says. "What they were able to deliver at that moment in time was so good, polished, and ready to be shown. There are some teams where there's a lot of back-and-forth on the core elements. It takes up time while certain parts of the game are being polished up, right? And they come toward the last six to nine months and say, 'Okay, could we tie it all together?'"

CHARACTER CHOICE

Continuing Québec's work with *Syndicate*, *Odyssey* features both a male and a female protagonist. Alexios and Kassandra are siblings who were separated during their childhood. Regardless of whether players choose Alexios (a man) or Kassandra (a woman), the main character will be an exiled Spartan mercenary. The other sibling will be a member of the secretive Cult of Kosmos, an organization that can be described as proto-Templar in its beliefs.

"We wanted to embrace a little bit of a rebellious attitude with our characters," Dansereau explains. "They were exiled Spartans. We knew that the Spartans trained women to fight as well as men; they had some really strong women. Kassandra was very special to us, I would have to say."

There was also a desire to represent what ancient Greece was like as a place.

"At the base of the idea of Alexios and Kassandra, we wanted to create characters that embodied and embraced what ancient Greece was about," *Odyssey* creative director Jonathan Dumont explains. "Ancient Greece was such a rich setting that was known not only for iconic historical factions, such as the Spartans and heroes of mythology, but also for the importance of its foundational storytelling through comedy, tragedy, and epics. We felt that our main characters needed to capture all of that. Influences from the Spartan warriors with the flair of Achilles felt like a powerful player fantasy when combined with the function of a mercenary, which allowed players to face difficult moral choices and a wide variety of situations in a world at war.

"A lot of research went into the designs of Kassandra and Alexios, trying to make them look like they emerged from that world. From outfits to hair design to the models themselves, our artists paid a lot of attention to authenticity. As I mentioned, we were inspired by all facets of ancient Greek storytelling, and we wanted players to express themselves in a wide variety of tones ranging from tragedy to comedy. I felt that Kassandra and Alexios needed to feel very human for them to be relatable. They needed to be able to show warmth and anger, to make us laugh and cry. It was a very difficult task that required the right actors to embody them. We conducted many auditions to find the precise actors who could truly play within that range, and we were very lucky to find Melissanthi Mahut and Michael Antonakos. Not only did they do a marvelous job playing Kassandra and Alexios but they also created that sibling bond throughout production, which was key for the story to work."

Their story was also inspired by *Odyssey*'s setting. The Greek tragedy is something that has persisted for thousands of years and was an appropriate thing to bring out in the story of Kassandra and Alexios.

"From a game perspective, the team wanted to allow role-play options in the story and it made a lot of sense to push player choice as far as choosing your character," Dumont says. "Still, we wanted both characters to exist in-world and to intertwine their destinies as we built their character and relationship supported by a Greek tragedy narrative where the importance of family was often at the forefront. Making them siblings of Spartan origins who had been estranged due to a family tragedy was something we really liked, and we started building their characters from there. It gave them a depth, a rivalry, and a bond that was very relatable."

Though the game took place long before the formation of the Assassin Brotherhood—and even prior to *Origins*' Hidden Ones—Québec wanted to tie this story to the franchise's main narrative. There are callbacks to some of the series' main aesthetic touchstones—Kassandra is known as the Eagle Bearer, for example—and there's also its iconic weaponry.

"We knew that we wouldn't have had a hidden blade at this point in time, which was fine, but we wanted to do

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something similar," Dansereau explains. "At some point, one of our concept artists at the time brought about the idea of fighting with a broken spear—that could act as a hidden blade."

Through the story of *Odyssey*, the developers wanted to showcase their vision of ancient Greece and all that it represented. Having two main characters who were Spartans but were more or less strangers to this world meant that the player was learning things alongside Kassandra and Alexios.

"The narrative of *Odyssey* is conducive to discovering the overwhelmingly rich heritage of ancient Greece in a layered fashion, while using structural elements from its storytelling legacy," Dumont explains. "Simply put, we wanted our players to discover this awesome setting in its entirety. The gods, the war, the scientific emergence, philosophy, democracy, the naval tradition are all great themes that unfold gradually through Alexios's and Kassandra's odyssey in the world.

"While our protagonists are from Sparta, they have not seen much of the world, so they discover it alongside our players. They learn together. In the story we use side characters as guides who embody those themes. For example, Barnabas, our ship captain, is a true believer in the gods and the myths and he teaches players all along the journey. Herodotus informs all we see from a historical point of view, and so on. All these characters make you understand the world in a layered fashion.

"The story of *Odyssey* is rooted in Greek tragedy and unfolds like an epic. It's a story about family and destiny where the forces of chaos and order collide. But it's also about forgiveness and moral ambiguity. Here we use narrative player choices to allow players to live the story and question the world they see, which is in essence a lesson taught by the great philosopher Socrates."

> "THE DEVELOPERS WANTED TO SHOWCASE THEIR VISION OF ANCIENT GREECE AND ALL THAT IT REPRESENTED."

Not playing as an Assassin isn't anything new for the franchise. As time has gone on, the approach that Ubisoft takes is that players will either be taking on the role of an Assassin or playing as an archetype: the pirate, the warrior, and so on. This was, in part, due to the success of *Black Flag*.

"One of the things that we've noticed over time is that people will rally around strong archetypes," Côté says. "That's not to say that an Assassin isn't a strong archetype. It is. The whole success of the franchise at the beginning was built around this idea of playing a master assassin. But one of the things that people asked us to do was to combat what is called franchise fatigue. For us, one of the ways to approach that was to offer players fresh archetypes that were appealing. When we did this in the past, it often led to massive successes for the franchise. For example, the first time you didn't play as an Assassin was in *Black Flag*. The funny thing about *Black Flag* is that you actually become an Assassin during the credits, not in the main game. People loved playing as a pirate. Of course, we dressed aspects of the game as being Assassin-like, but Edward was not an Assassin. Despite that, we built one of the biggest successes in terms of satisfaction engagement that we have with the franchise.

"We had a successful experiment there, and it took us around three to four years to get back to that idea that archetypes are very, very powerful. They are a way to bring freshness and diversity to the *Assassin's Creed* experience."

Though *Odyssey* was built on a lot of the same tech and with many of the same pillars as *Assassin's Creed Origins*, the Québec team wanted to go with another tone in its game.

"We wanted to bring a different tone into the game, to make sure that there was humor," Dansereau explains. "We didn't want the game to take itself too seriously. Part of the reason something like *Grand Theft Auto* is so successful is that there's a dark sense of humor to those games, as well as the gangster fantasy.

"Often games tend to take that stuff too seriously. At the end of the day, this is entertainment. You were surrounded with a cast that enjoyed bringing light to the main character. And I think that's the recipe that works for *Odyssey*."

Azaïzia adds, "*Origins* really was classic *Assassin's Creed*. It was a dramatic story about losing your son. It was incredibly emotional. People loved that, but the team wanted to make something a bit lighter for the next game. They wanted to change the tone, especially because they knew that there was going to be a family drama at court.

"The whole story starts out with classical drama—there's a murder in the family, betrayal, and everything. The idea was that the game should showcase different

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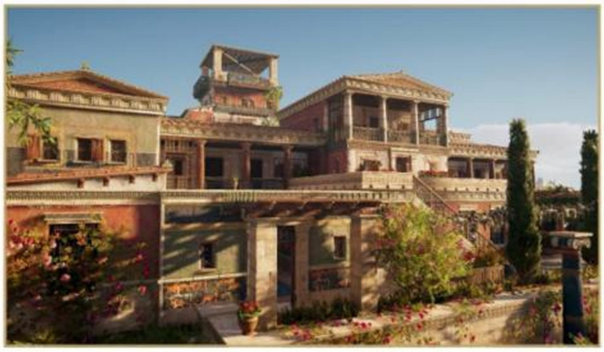

ranges of emotion and should be set in a super-bright environment with an overall lighter tone."

The team also learned this lesson from *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, where they had needed to introduce a lighter tone to parts of the game in order to make it more palatable.

"Asking somebody to play a game that is dramatic for thirty, forty, fifty, eighty hours is difficult; it can be emotionally draining," Azaïzia continues. "You need to have something lighter in order for the player to better enjoy the game. They utilized these different tones throughout the same game."

That's not to say that *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* didn't have its fair share of emotional story beats.

"One of the moments that I still dream about at night is when you finish the introduction and it's revealed that the Wolf of Sparta is Kassandra's father," Côté says.

"I remember watching this scene for the first time and crying. What happened to me? Why was I being so emotional? I think there was something that was really gripping about his story in *Odyssey*, despite it not being about Assassins and Templars. But again that's what I think freed us to explore something unique and to build a great game."

COLOR CODING

As with Industrial Revolution London, ancient Greece has been portrayed a fair amount in popular culture. We can all picture the white-and-gold color scheme—which was prevalent in the Québec studio's next game, *Immortals Fenyx Rising*.

For *Odyssey*, the team opted to take a different approach to the aesthetics of ancient Greece, one that would encourage players to spend more time within the game.

"We did a field trip before starting production properly on *Odyssey*, and it was quickly apparent that Greece is one of the most beautiful places in the world," Côté says. "That was something we wanted to capture. We hoped to increase the players' play time and engagement for

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this title. We thought that if *Odyssey* was aesthetically and narratively inviting, it would be something that people could enjoy for years, and come back to time and again. The look of the game was built around the idea that it needed to be an appealing place."

Dansereau adds, "I didn't know much about Greece before we went there and I just discovered this massive land; it's super colorful. There are tons of forests and mountains all over the place. It's not what you see in movies, where there's this image of Greece in ruins.

"We needed to depict Greece as a vacation destination even though we were in the midst of the Peloponnesian War. We wouldn't have been able to keep our players in the game if it was too oppressive, in terms of ambiance, and dark. At some point, it would have become too tough for players to stay in the game if it was so dark."

Re-creating Greece in *Odyssey* proved challenging, not least because this part of the world has its fair share of mountains and hills.

"We had a sixteen-by-sixteen-kilometer map, which gave us a 256-square-kilometer world," Dansereau explains. "We were re-creating the whole of Greece, so it was quite compressed, especially with the mountains. In reality, the footprint of the mountains is much wider; the challenge we had is that our mountains felt like hills because they were so compressed.

"So, we had to cheat. We had to avoid putting trees on top of mountains so as not to dwarf them. We also got rid of some mountains. But the mountains helped us create a lot of layering as well. They also hid stuff because at some point during production, we were able to see to the end of the Peloponnese from Athens. That meant we also had to play with fog and low clouds to try to create as much layering as we could."

Compared to *Syndicate*, *Odyssey* was a far bigger world. The team had to turn to some new techniques to fill the game's Greek setting with content.

"We had to learn new production techniques like working with procedural generation for vegetation and with the World Machine to generate terrain in the world," Dansereau says. "We hadn't done that before because we had mostly been working on cities. We had to relearn everything while making *Odyssey* basically."

In order to ensure that this world was filled with interesting content for players to engage with, the Québec team took a more curated approach.

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"We basically put a grid on the map and said, 'Okay, these are the different regions.' Each region would have a really strong theme: One of them would be death and vengeance. Another one would be more political. One was going to be about philosophy. There were quests that are connected to health and some connected to history. We tried to balance all of the area to have a little bit of everything but to still stay focused on the main theme. So, every region feels a bit more alive and unique."

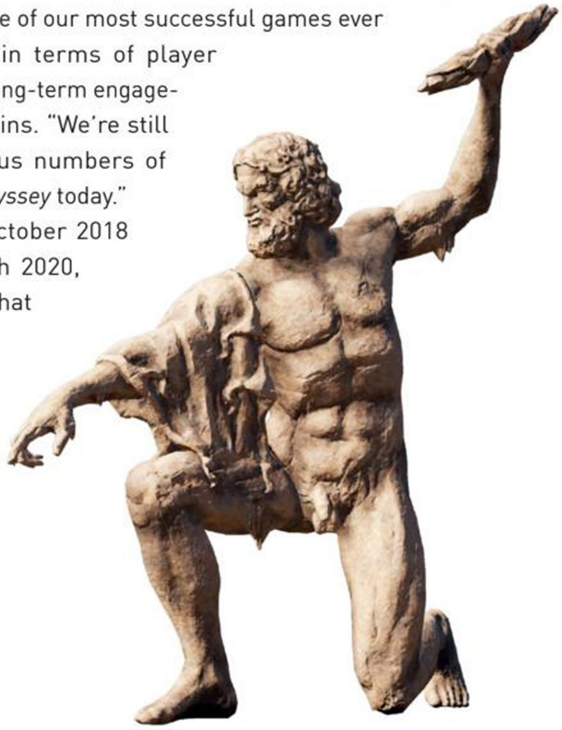
Much like *Origins*' Egypt, the team wanted to play around with elements of local mythology within *Odyssey*. But, this being *Assassin's Creed*, this was done with something of a twist.

"We wanted to have characters like the Cyclops or Medusa in *Odyssey*," Azaïzia says. "But the funny part was we were going to deal with these characters by explaining that they were First Civilization creatures, artifacts, monsters, but only like a third of them. When a player hears about the Minotaur, for example, they never know if it's going to be a real live Minotaur or just some huge guy with fur on his shoulders."

Odyssey built upon the success of *Origins*. One could not exist without the other, but the Québec team took the groundwork laid out in its predecessor and ran with it. The gamble of heading in more of an RPG direction also paid off, resulting in a title that people are still playing in huge numbers even to this day.

"*Odyssey* was one of our most successful games ever in the franchise in terms of player engagement and long-term engagement," Côté explains. "We're still seeing tremendous numbers of players playing *Odyssey* today."

Between the October 2018 launch and March 2020, Ubisoft reported that *Odyssey* had sold over ten million copies. That put it in line with *Origins* and other smash hits in the franchise.



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ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

Having been back to Egypt and ancient Greece, Ubisoft wanted to finish this trilogy of games off with another powerhouse faction of the ancient world—the Vikings.

This was something that the team who created *Origins* became fascinated with toward the end of that game's development.

"It's always like that toward the end of a production; there are a lot of coffee discussions and so on," Laferrière explains. "The Vikings were fascinating, not only as people but their culture and folklore were very inspiring. They could take us to some interesting locations, too."

By the fall of 2017, as *Origins* was released, artists started to draw concepts and sketches for what a Viking *Assassin's Creed* game would look like. As always, the Montréal team had to ask the approval of the company's Paris headquarters. By this point, it was clear that *Origins* was a runaway success, which meant that management had faith in this group of developers.

"We did so well on *Origins* that HQ trusted us to do almost whatever we wanted," Laferrière laughs.

Internally at Ubisoft, the team had a list of the settings that would be the most appealing to players. Vikings were one of the top contenders.

"We've known for years that every time we asked our players about what setting they'd like to see next for an *Assassin's Creed* game, the Viking Age would always rank as one of the highest," Baccard explains. "The Vikings were really appealing to players."

The Viking setting was also a perfect period for *Assassin's Creed*. Taking place during the Dark Ages, this era was ripe for Ubisoft to insert its revisionist history of Assassins versus Templars.

"The Dark Ages were pretty interesting because it's not a well-documented period at all," Laferrière explains.

"That gave us a lot of leeway there. We've never done a game set in the Dark Ages before. When we started to dig into England there're layers of civilizations on top of

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each other: Roman ruins and groups like the Welsh, the Picts, and the Saxons."

To start with, the team tried to narrow down which period of Viking history they wanted to tackle. Several sprung to mind.

"One was the idea of focusing on a raiding party based in Norway, going to Lindisfarne and all these different places," McDevitt explains. "But then the other was the Norman invasion of England—starting with Norman Vikings in France and then going over to England." But in the end, the team picked the Great Heathen Army's invasion of England, because it felt like the most self-contained story, both geographically and historically. It just so happened that the TV show *The Last Kingdom* had recently started, so it was getting people interested in that era.

"They were just on the cusp of choosing that time period when I joined. And I guess when I joined, it was as if I was another voice saying, 'Yes, that's a great time period.'"

Having decided on an appropriate era, the team needed to flesh out what story they were going to tell.

"We wanted to start in Norway, but find a reason why you were expelled," McDevitt says. "It was important to feel like you had been cast out from Norway, but that you didn't want to come back to kill the guy who expelled you. Otherwise, the story wouldn't be focused on England. England would have been the side story before you go back to murder the person who cast you out.

"We were really careful about designing a story in Norway where you get banished from Norway because your stepfather basically makes a series of terrible decisions and gives up his kingdom to a young King Harald. You couldn't begrudge him for taking a good deal."

A story surrounding the Vikings also meant that the team could create something that would serve as a contrast to previous *Assassin's Creed* titles. By this point, a lot of entries in the series had taken place around the Mediterranean Sea. A game set further north would certainly be a change of pace.

"With *Origins* and *Odyssey*—as well as with the Ezio Trilogy—it's always beautiful blue skies, gorgeous bluey-green water set in antiquity," Laferrière says. "We felt

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like we had this opportunity to do something novel. With the Vikings, it's the North Sea, Scandinavian landscapes, England . . . all of that felt pretty different."

A DIFFERENT KIND OF VIKING

The Vikings that have a place in popular culture are far removed from their real historical counterparts. For one, they didn't wear horned helmets—we can thank Wagner for that. Second, they weren't entirely focused on the rape and pillage that most people believed they were guilty of. Much of the history we know about this culture was written not by the Vikings themselves, but by those being invaded, stolen from, injured, or whose friends and family members had been killed.

"We had the opportunity to show a different side of history," Laferrière explains. "The history of Vikings was written mostly by the people that they conquered, so it's probably a bit biased. Don't get me wrong, they were brutal. But early on in *Valhalla*'s development we realized that we had this chance to show who these people were and what their motivations, their culture, and so on, were."

> "MUCH OF THE HISTORY WE KNOW ABOUT THIS CULTURE WAS WRITTEN NOT BY THE VIKINGS THEMSELVES, BUT BY THOSE BEING INVADED, STOLEN FROM, INJURED, OR WHOSE FRIENDS AND FAMILY MEMBERS HAD BEEN KILLED."

With *Valhalla*, the narrative team was given a specific challenge by Ubisoft's editorial team; the idea was that the game would be playable exactly how players wanted to go about it.

"They wanted people to have a lot of choice in the way that they played the game and made the experience their own. Not just in designing your own character and equipping your own gear, but also in playing the story the way you wanted. And that flew in the face of strong narrative storytelling," McDevitt laughs.

"Narratives are strong because things happen in exactly the right order; messing with that pacing can really throw it off. So, we decided that if Ubisoft wanted us to have this kind of choose-your-own-saga approach, then we needed to design a game in a way that made sense."

The idea that McDevitt and the narrative team came up with was for each quest to be its own self-contained story rather than having the main golden-narrative path and side missions. As it turns out, this was alarmingly close to the Viking sagas.

"The Viking sagas do not have a very strong through line, but they do have a strong central character typically," McDevitt says. "The big one that everyone talks about is probably *Egil's Saga*, which is a foundational saga. It seems like it's got everything that you'd ever want from a saga. It's got a tough-as-nails protagonist who is a warrior-poet. He just drifts around from Norway to Iceland to northern England. He fights with some English kings. As you read, you're just following this character around and watching him grow and learn. It's all about what honor is, what makes good leadership, and so on. We thought that if we had to make a game that allowed you to choose and shape your own story, then we were going to model it after the sagas, too."

Unsurprisingly, the Ubisoft Montréal team wanted a protagonist who offered a wide variety of the Viking experience. The hero of *Valhalla* wasn't just going to be a brute, pillaging lands far from their home, but a more rounded individual who had more complicated drives.

"We really wanted to have a character who was a leader," Laferrière says. "So, someone who was caught in the duality of having to lead but who also had their own ambitions, goals, and so on. We wanted someone who had to be selfish and selfless at the same time, who was driven by their own ambition, but who felt really responsible for the clan.

"But we also wanted someone who would let the player embrace this Viking fantasy of being a warrior hungry for conquests and to expand their influence, yet also being a poet, someone who was curious and had a thirst for knowledge. That was something that is very essential, I think, to the character. That's reflected in the way Eivor talks; they're someone who's really comfortable using their words, like in the flyting parts of the game—the rap battles that we have.

"Our goal was to depict the true range of the Vikings. The Norse were actually pretty refined people. They were not mindless barbarians. They were groomed. They were knowledgeable. They were amazing sailors. They were really complex characters. They weren't just out there

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thirsting for blood. They had reasons to be there. This is what we wanted to convey with our main characters. There's a rough exterior, but there's a lot of layers of subtlety for players to discover."

Though the raping and pillaging that the Vikings are infamous for is definitely overstated in how they are often depicted, those were things they did. That's a difficult circle to square if you are going to be playing as one of them for what might be hundreds of hours. After all, developers want players to like the person they are playing as.

"We wanted the Eivor character to have a slightly more modern sensibility," McDevitt says. "We want you to feel good about playing as them. So, we gave some more of the raiding and pillaging to the other characters to do, because it did happen. But we mixed this in with the realization that they're not just raiders at this time. They're settlers. What did they need to do to be settlers?"

A TALE OF TWO EIVORS

In both *Syndicate* and *Odyssey*, players could take on the role of either a male or a female protagonist. In the former, they could play as Jacob or Evie Frye; in the latter they were able to choose to play as either Kassandra or Alexios.

With *Valhalla*, the Ubisoft Montréal team wanted to continue the notion of choice in an RPG game, allowing the player to choose whether to play the male or female version of the same character.

Playing as female Eivor isn't just an aesthetic choice, either. Throughout the game, she has what appear to be visions of the First Civilization; however, it emerges that these aren't visions at all—they are memories.

"When you choose female Eivor, you're choosing to play as the reincarnation of Odin," McDevitt says. "I think that could have been confusing for people at first, but it's a cool mystery to solve. So, when you come out on the other end of the story, Odin is reborn. It all makes sense. That allows you also to justify Eivor herself going into these memories, which are actually memories of an Isu named Odin. But the memories have this Norse mythology wrapper because that's what Eivor understands. She likely wouldn't have understood the sci-fi, high-tech elements. She would have been thinking, 'What is all this?'"

When they boot up the game, players are given the choice to play as male or female Eivor by the Animus. But there's also a third option, allowing the Animus to decide for you. Officially, this is the canonical choice. Choosing this also results in some segments where Eivor is presented as a man; this is due to the high levels of male Isu DNA in their remains, given that Eivor is the reincarnation of Odin.

Much like *Odyssey* and *Black Flag* before it, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* doesn't star an Assassin. Eivor is a Viking warrior but is brought into the series' ongoing conflict.

"Given that it's *Assassin's Creed*, it's always important for me that if we're not going to tell a story about an Assassin, we have to tell a story about somebody who had an impact on the Assassins' war with the Templars, or—conversely—somebody who had been affected by that conflict," McDevitt explains. "We wanted to tell a story about a Viking. Yet we didn't want to tell a story about an Assassin in the Viking Age because that wasn't a real thing—that's our own fictional creation—and if we had created a Viking Assassin, that might have put us at arm's length to the actual historical meat of this time period."

Playing as a Viking also helped the story come into focus for McDevitt and the group. A person from this culture at this point in history would have faced some unique challenges around which the Ubisoft team could work out a story and character.

"Once you said you were going to make a game about a Viking, the question was, What were the unique problems that they dealt with?" McDevitt says. "How would you show them dealing with those unique problems in a way that was common to all of us? It was a bit of a balancing act. The big difference about Viking culture, for instance, was that they had this idea of honor and shame. That was their culture. They weren't about virtue and sin—that's Christianity. Honor and shame were at the bedrock of Norse culture.

"We decided to tell the story of someone who is always in search of honor and sometimes feels in danger of losing it. They worry from the very beginning that they're going to dishonor and betray their brother in pursuit of their own honor. Prophecy was a big thing. Then we started to weave all of that into a story that evoked the Vikings, but which would also seem familiar to mainstream audiences.

"The game is about leadership and honor in all of the story arcs."

When Eivor does touch upon the more Assassin-focused elements of *Valhalla*, they are certain to do so with their own touch.

"Even the way they wear the hidden blade is different," Laferrière says. "They wear it on top because they don't understand why you'd want to hide such a beautifully crafted blade."

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TO NEW LANDS

In order to research *Valhalla*, the team went to a number of locations that the game would be set in, including Norway and England. After visiting the former, they had a better understanding of why the Vikings might not want to live there all the time.

"Once you spend any time in northern Norway, you realize it's very obvious why they went and robbed and pillaged," McDevitt says. "There is nothing here. There are scant trees up in the north and food is really hard to come by. If you visit Norway, especially in the winter, you understand how this culture could have developed. It makes a lot of sense. You can appreciate why the gods looked and acted the way they did. It's these incredibly dramatic, desolate landscapes that you can imagine the likes of Thor, Odin, and Freyja existing in. Going there on a trip for almost three weeks was also quite eye opening, and it gave us a very good understanding of how we were going to depict this as a full culture."

Making England from this time period work within an *Assassin's Creed* context also proved to be something of a challenge. To put it bluntly, there wasn't much there at that period, and what would have been there wasn't as impressive as what had been shown in some of the previous games in the franchise.

"Very early on, I realized that landmarks were going to be a big challenge for the team because that time, specifically that time in the UK, wasn't a moment where you had big pyramids," Durand says. "There's a lot of beautiful nature, but the fortresses that they had at the time of the Anglo-Saxons weren't exactly what we had in the game. Instead, most of them were motte-and-bailey castles. They were wooden castles with wooden fences and a moat. That was not what the team was hoping for."

So, the developers found a way to bring more modern—and more exciting—architecture into the world of *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*.

"I would say we cheated a bit," Lacoste laughs. "It was okay because it was for the game. It was interesting to

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play with both the different timelines and the Animus glitches in the simulation. When we created the churches, we wanted to take a version of the church that would have existed a bit after the Dark Ages, because we wanted to have steeples, towers, and bell towers, which wouldn't have existed in AD 900. Because we are *Assassin's Creed*, we wanted to have rich icons. We had to have verticality in the game, not just for exploration, but so these different vertical structures would be seen from the distance. Additionally, we wanted these places to feel more alive, places that players would want to go to, so there was this welcoming feeling as well. And playing with the stained glass color made these very inviting and interesting moments of beauty."

England during the Dark Ages might not have been the most interesting setting, but it was a location that had an intriguing history. It had been touched by an empire that spanned large parts of the world.

"We wanted to keep the Roman architecture as interesting and mysterious structures," Lacoste says. "The aqueduct near London or the ancient Roman bath, all these interesting Roman villas helped to bring verticality. They also add mystery because they are big, tall stone walls and statues, remnants from these Roman ages. They have been taken over by people who are making small houses and fragile structures next to the walls of these ancient creations. There's a resonance from the past, along with some mystery about the ancient builders of these structures. These remains only help to bring this kind of romantic tone to the game.

"That was also a reason why we looked at the painters like Caspar David Friedrich and others from the nineteenth century who made these interesting compositions using the rooms and the nature. So that's the angle we took for England: make it even more interesting and make it more beautiful."

As well as creating the different parts of England, the team also decided to implement a seasonal system.

"We had three different seasons in England to bring to life and add diversity to the world," Lacoste says. "So,

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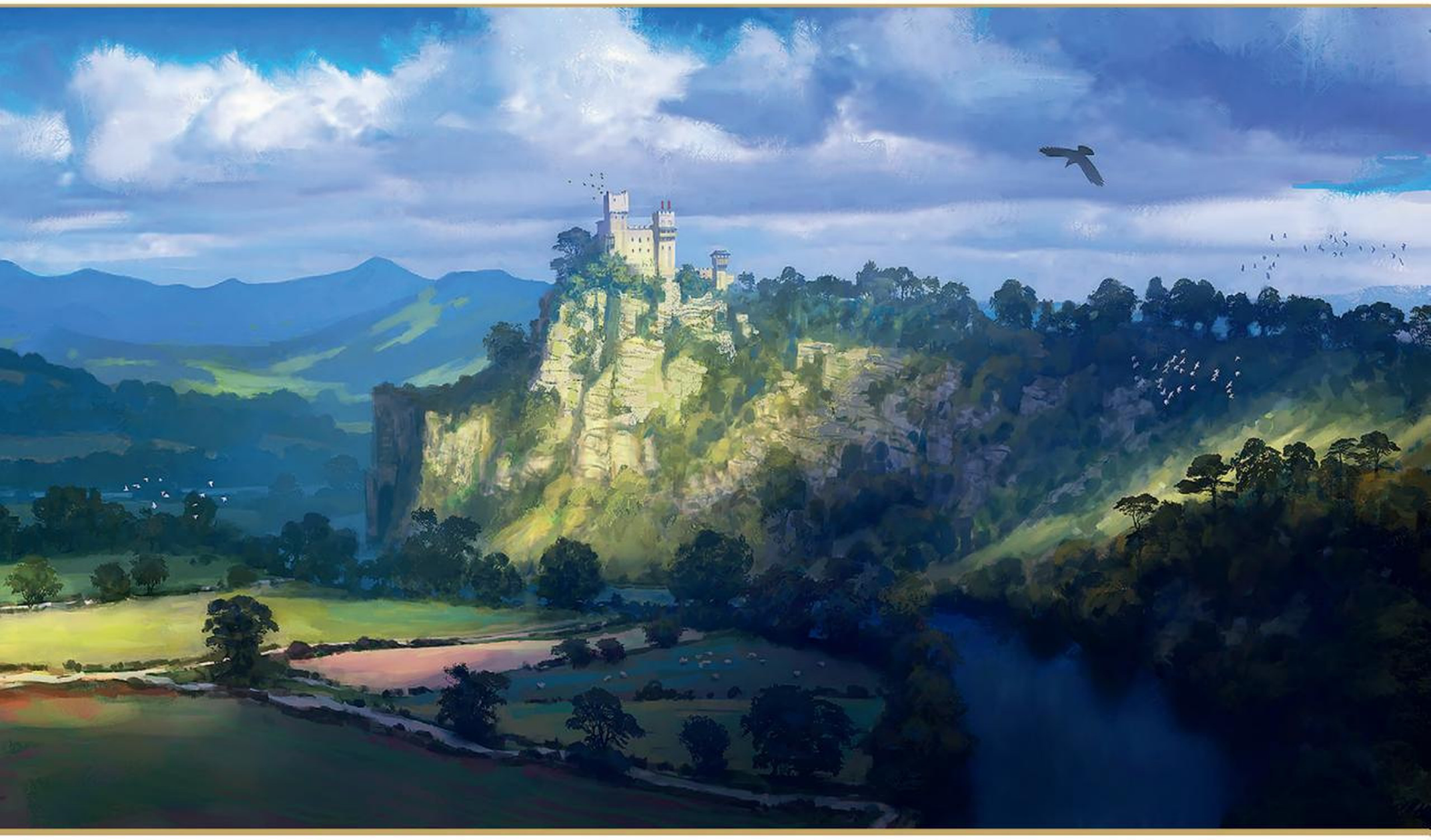

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when you go to the south, to Seven Sisters, it's during this beautiful, lush summer. When you go to Lincolnscire, it's during the fall so the light is different. The region is covered in shades of red and orange, and it's starting to get a bit dry. Then when you go up north to Northumbria, you get the start of winter. There it's colder and you have these rolling hills covered with snow, which fit in well with the Viking aspect. We wanted to make these creative choices and change the architecture and the style to have these very bold feelings for different regions."

Part of the story of *Valhalla* is concerned with the idea of finding a home. The Vikings' native land is inhospitable and cold, so they are keen to settle down elsewhere. This allowed the team to reach into its pocket of mechanics that it had created over the course of *Assassin's Creed*'s history and to redeploy the ideas found in *Assassin's Creed II*'s Villa Auditore or *Assassin's Creed III*'s Homestead: a place that the player can call home.

"*Valhalla* was a stranger-in-a-strange-land story," Laferrière explains. "We decided to have a village in the middle of the map that would grow, and which would make the player feel like a Viking clan leader. It was realistic. We were able to take inspiration from Villa Auditore and what we had learned from making the villa to make this village even more meaningful for players. At first, the settlement was even called Villa Plus."

"WE DECIDED TO HAVE A VILLAGE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MAP THAT WOULD GROW, AND WHICH WOULD MAKE THE PLAYER FEEL LIKE A VIKING CLAN LEADER."

The team was even able to reintroduce the idea of social stealth. This had been a key part of the *Assassin's Creed* formula at the start of the series, but had become less of a focus in later games.

"We asked how it would be possible for a Viking to be stealthy, wearing fur, tattoos, braids, as well as an axe and a shield in the middle of an English town," Laferrière remembers. "We figured that a good way to reintroduce social stealth would be for the player to wear some sort of a cloak and try to blend in with the crowd."

In some ways, *Valhalla* feels like a greatest hits of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, bringing together many different gameplay mechanics that the various Ubisoft teams had come up with over the years.

"We were in a mindset where we saw an opening to capitalize on the brand history," Laferrière says. "That got us excited. We decided to have a trip to America, to do a little tribute to *Assassin's Creed III*. As we got our wheels into motion, we felt we had this opportunity to make the most of our brand, and it really got us excited."

HAMMER OF THE GODS

With *Valhalla*, the team had the chance to expand upon the lore of the First Civilization. Previous games like *Odyssey* had featured members of this race, known to humankind as gods. However, with *Valhalla*'s Viking setting, Ubisoft had the chance to talk more about the Isu.

"Our idea was that the First Civ were a real group of people, and that the myths we have as humans are the end results of a giant game of telephone that warped these real, historical stories into mythological tales," McDevitt says. "So, we made the decision that said there was a Norse pantheon of First Civ, and that they were frequently at war with the Greco-Roman and Egyptian pantheons.

"Norse mythology is fun and wild and weird. It's not as well known as Greco-Roman mythology, but there's something weirdly beautiful about it."

Valhalla continued the RPG elements introduced in *Origins*, though to a slightly lesser degree than *Odyssey*. Dialogue choices returned, as did that title's leveling and crafting mechanics. But one aspect that was changed was how weapons worked.

"In *Assassin's Creed Origins* for example, players could find one of the most epic weapons and stick with it until the end of the game," Azaïzia says. "They could just upgrade the same weapon again and again. We wanted people to play and change the equipment. In *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, we introduced a system where every weapon—especially on the last stage—came with a unique skill and ability. That meant that players could build and create various builds and play with the different tools that they had to adapt to the situation."

Another tweak was making quests feel more organic.

"That's why secondary missions are not flagged or tagged as a secondary mission," Azaïzia says. "You have a character with a question mark over their head, and it's more natural. You come to someone, you can hear a conversation, you can witness an event happening. Then

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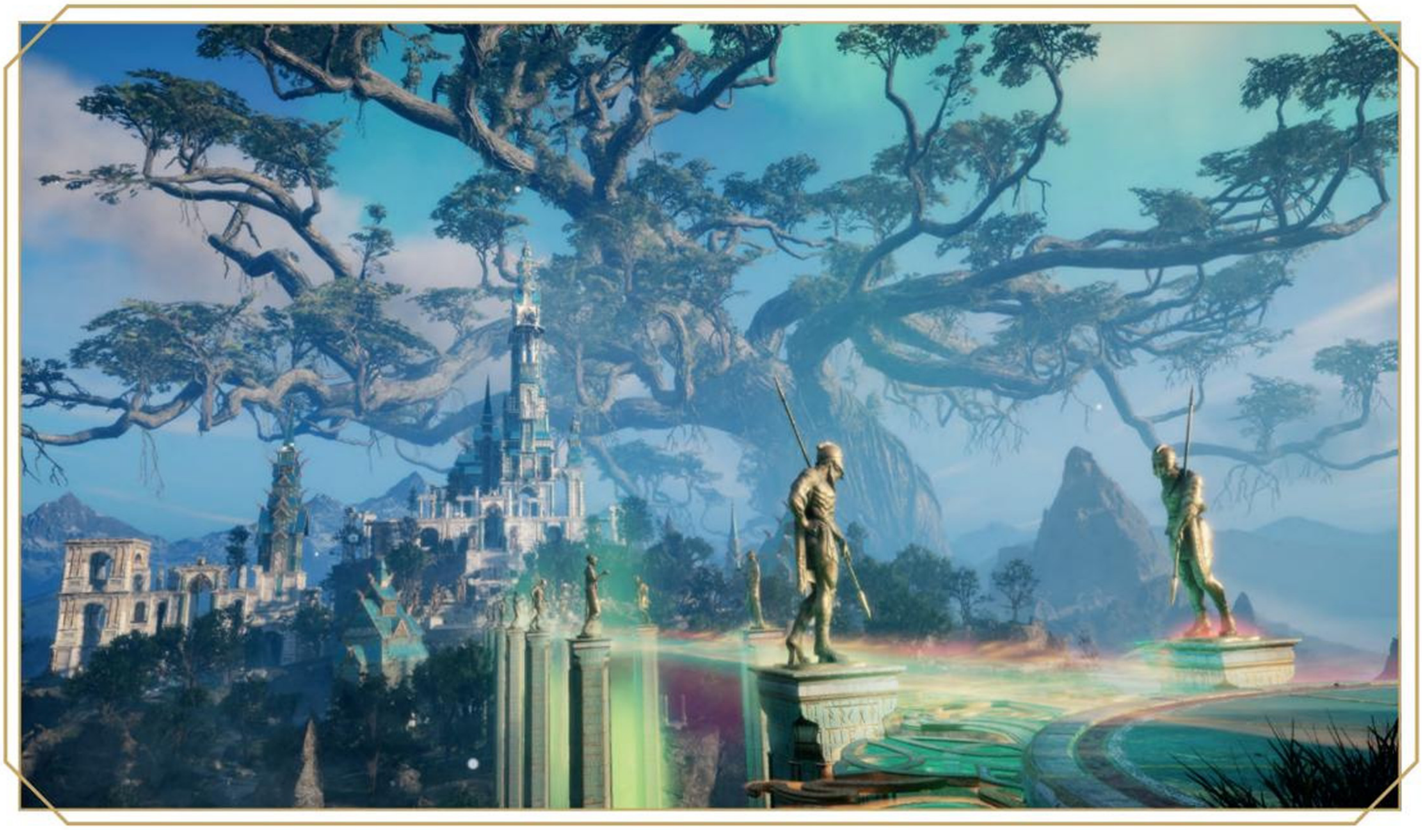

you improvise and you use the tool that you have in order to do something. It's not always about fighting or killing someone. There are a lot of different opportunities in the world. That way the game feels more like a real place."

On top of all this, *Valhalla* brings some classic Assassins back into the mix with Basim. Originating from the Middle East, this character will certainly bring back memories for longtime fans of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise.

"Players wanted more *Assassin's Creed* in *Valhalla*," Azaïzia explains. "That's why we have characters like Basim, who, coming from the Middle East, is not only the embodiment of a typical Assassin, but who also plays a major part in the story. Basim was designed to bring back the full-fledged Assassins front and center. He's a character that really resonates with the fans. He's truly a pure Assassin."

Part of the reason that Basim is present in *Valhalla* was because Eivor wasn't able to do a lot of what the Assassins are all about. The Vikings' philosophy runs counter to that of the Assassins.

"It was tricky to mix the fantasy of being a Viking with the fantasy of being an Assassin," Azaïzia says. "The rule set that comes with being an Assassin means that you don't kill innocent people; you are meant to hide in plain sight. Vikings, meanwhile, are generally meant to be raiding. That, plus killing innocent people, meant they weren't compatible."

In popular culture, the Vikings present a striking image, something that is probably every marketer's dream. But the team had to think hard about how to portray them in *Valhalla*, given that this was intended to be a more rounded depiction of this group of people.

"There were a lot of back-and-forth discussions and debates," says Anouk Bachman, product manager on *Valhalla* and former transmedia product manager for the *Assassin's Creed* brand. "Things like how were we going to present Eivor because there's this ultraviolent Viking fantasy with axes and so on. But we also wanted to show more depth."

Baccard adds, "The aim of the team was really to show that Vikings weren't the barbarians that they are usually portrayed as. We wanted to make it clear that they also had this whole belief system and culture. Everything was about honor, so we really tried to portray that in the game and in our marketing assets."

Valhalla launched in November 2020 for the existing PlayStation 4 and Xbox One consoles, and also the new generation of hardware as well as PC. As a result, it was a massive seller, selling 1.8 million copies during its first week on sale. To date, it is Ubisoft's second-most-profitable title.

With *Valhalla*, the second age of *Assassin's Creed* has come to a close.

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ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA DAWN OF RAGNARÖK

While *Valhalla* touched upon Norse mythology, it was still a very realistic game in a lot of ways. But some of the developers wanted to delve further into Norse mythology.

With the expansion *Dawn of Ragnarök*, Ubisoft Sofia was given free rein to explore the beliefs of the Viking people. Set in Svartalfheim, one of the Nine Realms, the game has players take on the role of Odin to find his lost son.

"Eivor is an incarnation of Odin, so it was an opportunity to explore this facet of her character," Lozanov explains. "It's a continuation of Eivor's story, but covers what Odin did back in the past. Odin is sent on a very dangerous journey to save his son Baldr. Baldr dying is a sign of the coming Ragnarök—the end of the world."

In many ways, this is similar to the *Assassin's Creed Origins* expansion, *The Curse of the Pharaohs*. But rather than "fantastical," Lozanov prefers the word "surreal" to describe the tone of *Dawn of Ragnarök*.

"It's still grounded in something," he explains. "It wasn't purely fantastical. We wanted it to be grounded in the beliefs of people. This is part of the *Assassin's Creed* brand in general. That's why we prefer to call this surreal—because it describes and grounds it better."

Approaching these more surreal expansions in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise was similar to how the teams handled historically based releases—by talking to lots of smart people in the relevant fields.

"We still talked with experts in these fields and we read all the sagas that were relevant," Lozanov says. "This is our prime source of inspiration. That's why it fits in *Assassin's Creed*: because it's still grounded in the beliefs of the Vikings. *Curse of the Pharaohs* was based on what was written on the walls of the tombs, and going into the beliefs of people back then. We talked to experts in this field, who sometimes are historians as well. We built narratives, we built characters, we built worlds that are true to these beliefs."

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FEMALE EIVOR: CECILIE STENSPIL

To portray the female Eivor, Ubisoft brought in Danish actor Cecilie Stenspil. When she first heard about the role, she was told it was going to be a video game, but she wasn't told which one. When the time came for the audition, she was at home with a small child, so she had to retreat to the rooftop terrace of her house.

"I was standing on my rooftop terrace screaming, 'For Odin!' and so on," Stenspil remembers. "I could see my neighbor walking past looking up, probably thinking that the actress has actually gone nuts."

When she finally landed the role, Stenspil started working on figuring out exactly who Eivor was. This was very much a collaborative process between her and Ubisoft staff.

"As a young woman, Eivor had been attacked by wolves," she remembers. "And I felt it was necessary that you are able to hear that kind of raspy quality in Eivor's voice due to her accident. Even though she sometimes speaks with a lower tone, she is still feminine. She just doesn't have a very high-pitched voice. She sounds a little more warrior-like. They actually grabbed onto that idea. It gives the character a lot of presence."

Stenspil also pushed for Eivor to have a clear Danish tinge to her voice, something that had to be balanced with the fact that this was a game that'd be played globally.

"In Danish, we don't say 'Thor,' we say 'Tour,'" she explains. "I really wanted to have that rolling *r*. Of course, there were some compromises because everybody around the world needed to understand that it's Thor I'm talking about."

When the coronavirus pandemic hit in 2020 and people had to work from home, Ubisoft even created a recording studio at Stenspil's home in Denmark.

"I had a studio in the basement and we had a sound technician working from abroad; they could remote control all my keys so I didn't have to touch anything," she says. "I could just work and speak into the microphone. That way I didn't mess up anything with the sound."

At the time of writing, Stenspil has been working on Eivor for roughly three years. By this point, she has an intimate relationship with the character.

"She's a driven family-loving fighter with a warm heart," Stenspil says. "She's a passionate Viking warrior who'd love for you to join her on her journeys."

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MALE EIVOR: MAGNUS BRUUN

Like Cecilie Stenspil, Magnus Bruun didn't know he was auditioning for *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* when he tried out for his part. He thought he was going to be part of a Canadian animated series titled *The Black Wolf Saga*. After a self-taped interview, he flew out to London to do an in-person audition and quickly landed the role.

For Bruun, it was important that Eivor wasn't just a gruff warrior, but that he had many different layers.

"We didn't want to make this brute of a Viking who could only be a savage," Bruun says. "We wanted to make Eivor a young Viking leader that you would want to follow, that you would want to hear stories about. You should feel like you could fall in love with Eivor, that you would want to make alliances with this Viking. But also, you need to be intimidated by him at times, too."

Bruun had previously played Cnut Ranulfson on the TV show *The Last Kingdom*, so he already had a solid knowledge of Norse history and mythology. But he also says that McDevitt gave him a lot to work with.

"He's such a lovely man and very dear to me. His work is just incredible," Bruun says. "I remember I did a line at some point in the recordings where Eivor arrives back at his own old town that is just a ruin now. It's a gameplay line, an inner monologue. 'Home, or it used to be home. Now it's nothing but bone.' I remember that resonated so hard and heavy in me because that told the whole story of him losing his whole family. I remember stopping the recording and calling up Darby to tell him how good he is."

This was also Bruun's first time doing performance capture, which required a fair share of learning.

"I'm used to being physical, but I had to wear this helmet with three cameras on the front," he remembers. "So, I couldn't get close enough to the other actors. If I actually hugged them, the head cams would crash together."

Performance capture also meant that Bruun had to be clean shaven so that Ubisoft could get the animation data they needed.

"I had come from *The Last Kingdom* playing this Viking warlord with a huge beard, long hair, and face tattoos. So I had to shave my beard off to do the face animation," he says. "They stripped away all of the Viking and put me in this black spandex suit with dots on it."

Asked who Eivor is as a character, Bruun says that they are a typical youngest sibling.

"They're more curious, more fearless, more adventurous," he says. "But they also have the most heartfelt loyalty to their family. There are so many words to describe Eivor . . . loyal, heartfelt, impulsive, loving, curious . . ."

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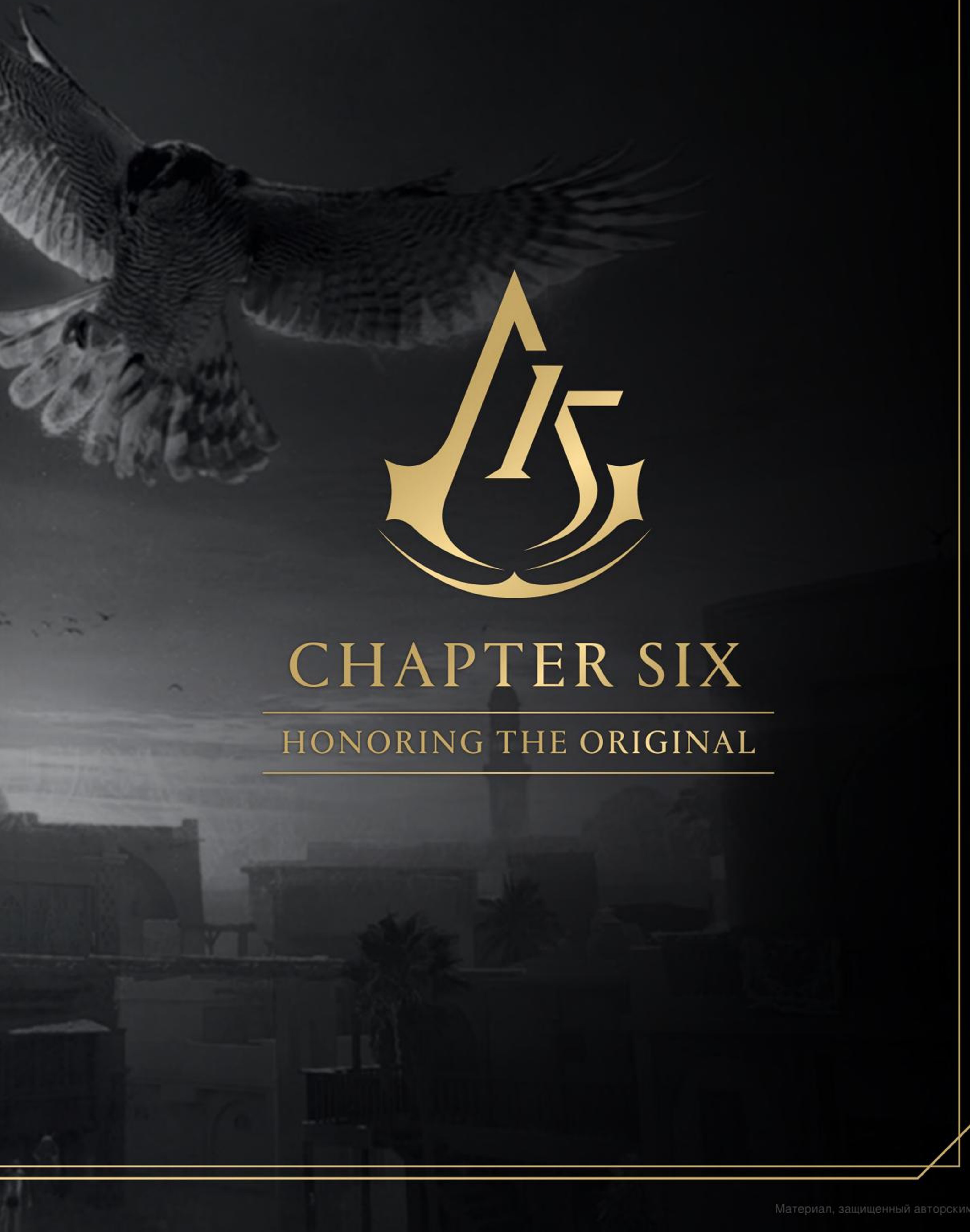

CHAPTER SIX

HONORING THE ORIGINAL

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ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE

In its fifteen years, *Assassin's Creed* has come a long way.

What started as a stealth franchise about an order of warriors covertly taking out their targets has evolved a great deal over its lifetime. Recent entries in the series have adopted more open-world RPG sensibilities, and many of these titles don't even star Assassins at all.

But for *Assassin's Creed*'s fifteenth anniversary, Ubisoft wanted to get back to the roots of the franchise with a title named *Mirage*, initially code-named Rift. This is a standalone release that is somewhat linked to 2020's *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* and stars the Assassin Basim in Baghdad. But he was not always the intended protagonist.

"The original idea was to bring Eivor to the Middle East to complete her training as a 'true' Assassin," creative director Stéphane Boudon says.

"Our intention was to get back to a city-scale open world, bring back the iconic ingredients and tools of the Assassin, and design a stealth experience with visceral assassinations. We knew the franchise's fifteenth anniversary was coming up, and we wanted to pay tribute to the first *Assassin's Creed*.

"The idea lived only for a few months on paper, and then, thanks to its promise and its potential, it quickly evolved into a standalone game with its own main character: Basim. Thus, *Mirage* was born."

The title is being helmed by Ubisoft's Bordeaux team, a relatively new studio in the French publishing giant's roster of developers. To date, it has contributed to 2019's *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Breakpoint*, as well as creating the *Wrath of the Druids* expansion for *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*.

Mirage is the first time that the Bordeaux studio is leading the development on a project, which is a real vote of confidence for the team.

"We are quite a new team to the brand," Boudon explains. "But many of us have already worked on the franchise before. We have the team, the talent, and a great idea—we have everything we need to make our pitch appealing.

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"Soon after, other great studios knowledgeable of the franchise joined us to complete our production team.

"The ambition was indeed to get back to the root of the franchise and offer a rich experience with a character-driven story."

Initially, *Mirage* was intended to be the fourth expansion for *Valhalla*. The Bordeaux studio was keen to create something fantastical and based on mythology. The Basim of this game is a very different character to the one we met in *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*. By that point he was a Master Assassin who had traveled the world, but his background was a blank slate—one that the team at Bordeaux was more than happy to fill in.

"*Mirage* tells the story of Basim from a street thief to a Master Assassin. As someone whose father was once exiled by the caliph, Basim is eager to join this mysterious group of liberators called the Hidden Ones, who are legends to him," narrative director Sarah Beaulieu explains.

"But Basim is not an ordinary man. Every morning, for as long as he can remember, he wakes up in terror, a jinni crawling on his chest. Basim knows there is something special about him.

"When he gets the opportunity to show his skills to the Hidden Ones by stealing an object from the caliph, Basim seizes it. Even if his attempt has disastrous consequences, it leads him to join the Hidden Ones. By doing so, he will learn more about the origins and the meaning of his nightmares.

"As a character, Basim is driven by his desire to bring back justice in Baghdad, and his oath to the creed is deeply important to him. But as he assassinates his way to the head of the Order, the Hidden Ones' historical enemies, his nightmares get worse, and the need for answers becomes more and more significant.

"Basim is a generous man, devoted to others and easy to speak to. Except with another character called Nehal, who is Basim's best friend, and sometimes with Roshan, his mentor, Basim rarely talks about his own struggles. Therefore, he will also show a more impulsive side.

"Through the course of the game, Basim meets people who continue to shape and influence his choices: Nehal, Roshan, and Ali in particular. They all convey our story themes: identity, family, and freedom."

Basim's relationship with Roshan is in many ways the backbone of *Mirage*'s narrative. While they share a strong bond, Basim is plagued by something he does not fully understand—something that could put him on a dark trajectory.

"Roshan considers the Hidden Ones' creed above everything else, and the Brotherhood is a family to her," Beaulieu says. "When she asks Basim to join them, she knows he can bring a lot to the cause. But she also slowly discovers that Basim is struggling with his nightmares and visions, and that he is looking for answers. To protect him, she will try to keep him away from what she thinks is a dangerous path. Roshan and Basim's

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relationship comes in opposition to Nehal and Basim's relationship. Roshan dedicates her life to the Hidden Ones, whereas Nehal always reminds Basim that he can only trust himself. This opposition is key to the character's transformational arc. If Basim had not met Roshan and the Hidden Ones, and if Roshan had not reacted the way she did to his identity crisis, who knows how things would have ended?"

As always, the garb the protagonist wears in an *Assassin's Creed* game is a mix of the series' iconography —such as the eagle motif—and contemporary materials and fashion.

"Basim will be able to change his outfit during the game, but his first Assassin costume is a great display of mixing Assassin legacy shapes and colors with medieval Arabic elements," Beaulieu says.

"The fabrics are very sophisticated thanks to goods coming from the Silk Road, the hood is made with a cheche for the long travels into the desert, and the pompoms give a unique touch to this outfit.

"We needed a personal detail on Basim's outfit, something that would bring more to the character. This detail is the piece of earthenware he wears on his outfit: a piece he took from the walls of his childhood house in Samarra before his father was exiled and Basim was left in the streets. He always keeps it with him."

From the very start, the team at Ubisoft Bordeaux wanted to set the game in the Middle East. After all, this is where the *Assassin's Creed* franchise was born. After landing on Basim as the main character, they knew that Baghdad had to be the setting for this game.

"At the time, Baghdad was the center of the world," Stéphane Boudon says. "It was not only the biggest city, but also a cultural crossroad like no other in history.

"If you add to that the proximity of Alamut, as we wanted to showcase the Hidden Ones' organization, we were approaching the near-perfect setting. Every piece just came together."

Though Baghdad was a very impressive city at the time *Mirage* is set, today it does not exist in the same way.

"There is nothing left from Madinat al-Salam, the 'City of Peace,' as Baghdad was originally called," Boudon says.

"As a result, re-creating the city involved a huge effort of looking through historical records, research, and

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documentation with the collaboration of highly skilled historians. Some of this knowledge has been lost forever, so we tried to stay as authentic as possible. For the missing pieces, we have taken some liberties to fill in the blanks, inspired either by cultures that were nearby at the time or by later time periods."

As it's depicted in *Mirage*, Baghdad is split into several unique districts, each with a specific theme.

"Harbiyah, for instance, is the industrial district, quite poor," Boudon says. "You will encounter quite a cosmopolitan population there. Abbasiyah, on the other hand, is a district centered around knowledge and culture, where the great House of Wisdom stands. Karkh is our merchants' district, one of the central nodes of the Silk Road, with its grand bazaar where goods from all over the world are sold.

"Overall, the result is impressive, and we think it will stay one of the best depictions of ninth-century Baghdad for years to come."

As always, the setting in an *Assassin's Creed* game is not only its own character in many ways but often ends up informing what players will actually be spending their time doing in the game.

"We designed Baghdad as a great sandbox," Boudon says. "We've filled it up with opportunities, especially opportunities for parkour with a huge density of buildings and ingredients allowing you to cross the city using dedicated 'highways' on the roofs. But also, opportunities for stealth and assassinations during missions and black-box assassinations. Baghdad offers a lot of places to hide and to break the line of sight—all that mixed with the return of some well-known iconic ingredients, such as the mercenaries you can hire or the blending patrol.

"The city and the Baghdad police are also aware of your actions thanks to Wanted levels, so if you do too many illegal activities, you will have to face the consequences."

Allonier adds: "One of the pillars of the experience is being citycentric instead of countrycentric. There's a lot more parkour and running on the rooftops, but stealth is also more of a focus for many reasons. The idea is to tell the story of Basim and show how this young kid uses the city as his playground. Stealth and parkour make sense in this context. People sometimes say that stealth is not at the center of *Valhalla* and *Odyssey*, because it

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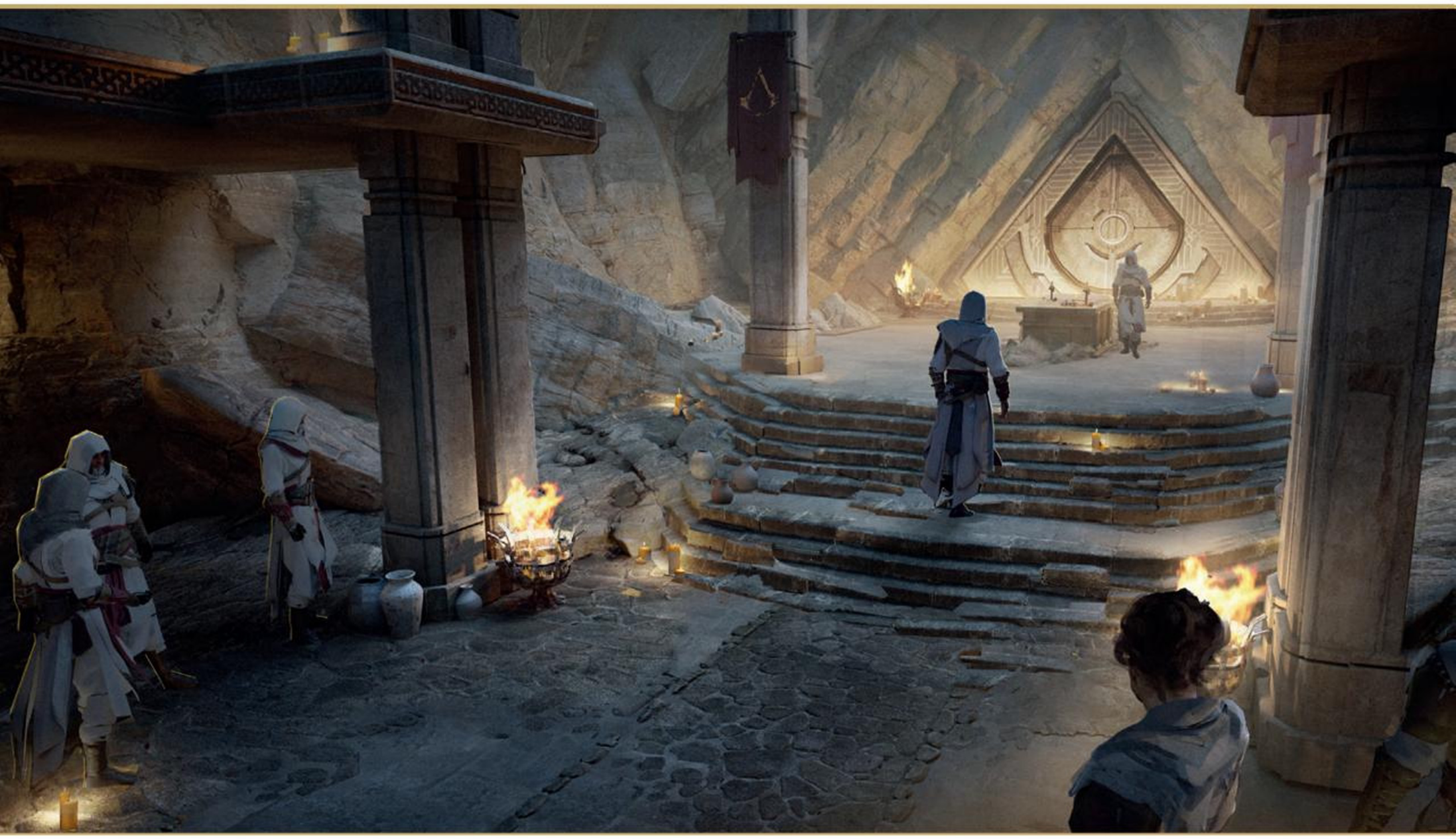

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makes less sense in the context. You don't want to see a Viking being stealthy, apart from on a few small missions in *Valhalla*. In *Mirage*, it makes sense because the city is the ideal playground for stealth and Basim as a young thief."

Having Basim as the main character of the game meant that *Mirage* had to take place in the ninth century. Fortunately, this is a rich canvas on which to tell an interesting story set within a fascinating city.

"We decided to start the game during the death of the caliph al-Mutawakkil," Sarah Beaulieu says.

"This specific event is one of the key elements that will initiate the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate and foreshadows the end of the Golden Age. It acts as a starting point for the journey of Basim.

"We wanted to add to our story Ali ibn Muhammad, the leader of the rebellion in *Mirage*, who is a key historical character, charismatic and memorable. The Zanj rebellion would only happen a few years after the events of *Mirage*, but we decided to imagine how it could have begun and how the Hidden Ones could have been involved in it."

Though in many ways *Mirage* is a throwback to the original *Assassin's Creed*, the game isn't ignoring the journey that the franchise has been on over its fifteen-year history.

"With *Assassin's Creed Mirage*, our aim was to create the perfect synthesis between past and present gameplay. We wanted to bring back legacy features in an accessible and modernized way," Stéphane Boudon explains.

"Indeed, the *Assassin's Creed* franchise has evolved over time and has been reinvented. With those transformations, we've gained new gameplay possibilities; we've discovered new kinds of fantasy but sometimes at the expense of other features, as they could collapse each other.

"The parkour is a great example of those transformations. With *Assassin's Creed Origins* we introduced this vast and magnificent wild open world, but to do so we had to turn down the city aspect. Building density and the size of the cities both changed. We wanted a wild vista with long journeys on horse or camel. The parkour was still there, but the playground we built didn't emphasize that feature anymore.

"Revisiting our legacy pillars is about bringing back both memories and mechanics, but not by reproducing past gameplay. We want to incorporate all the improvements the franchise has made over the last fifteen years.

"It has been a lot of work, a big puzzle where we must make bold decisions, and we hope our players will love it."

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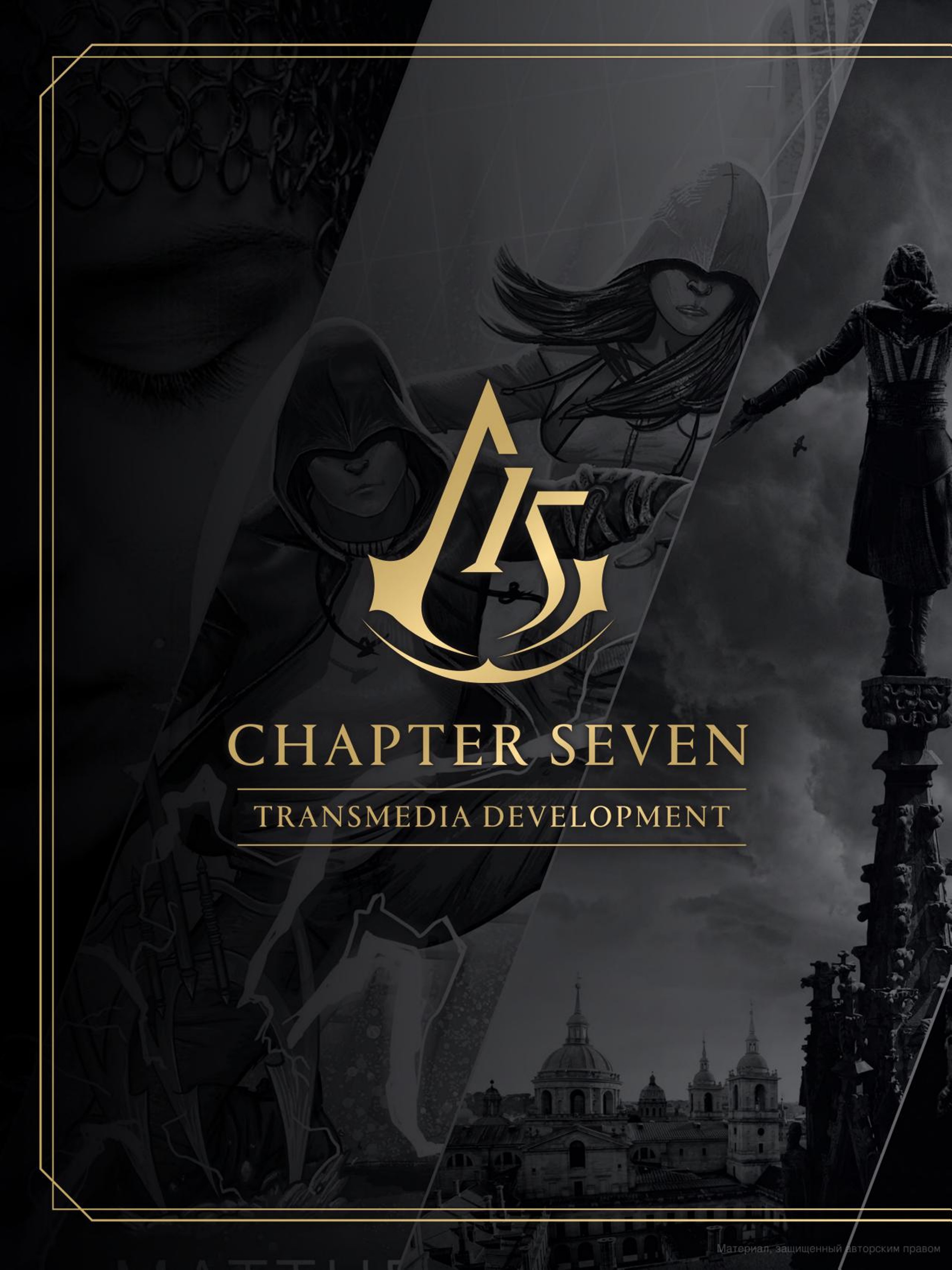

CHAPTER SEVEN

TRANSMEDIA DEVELOPMENT

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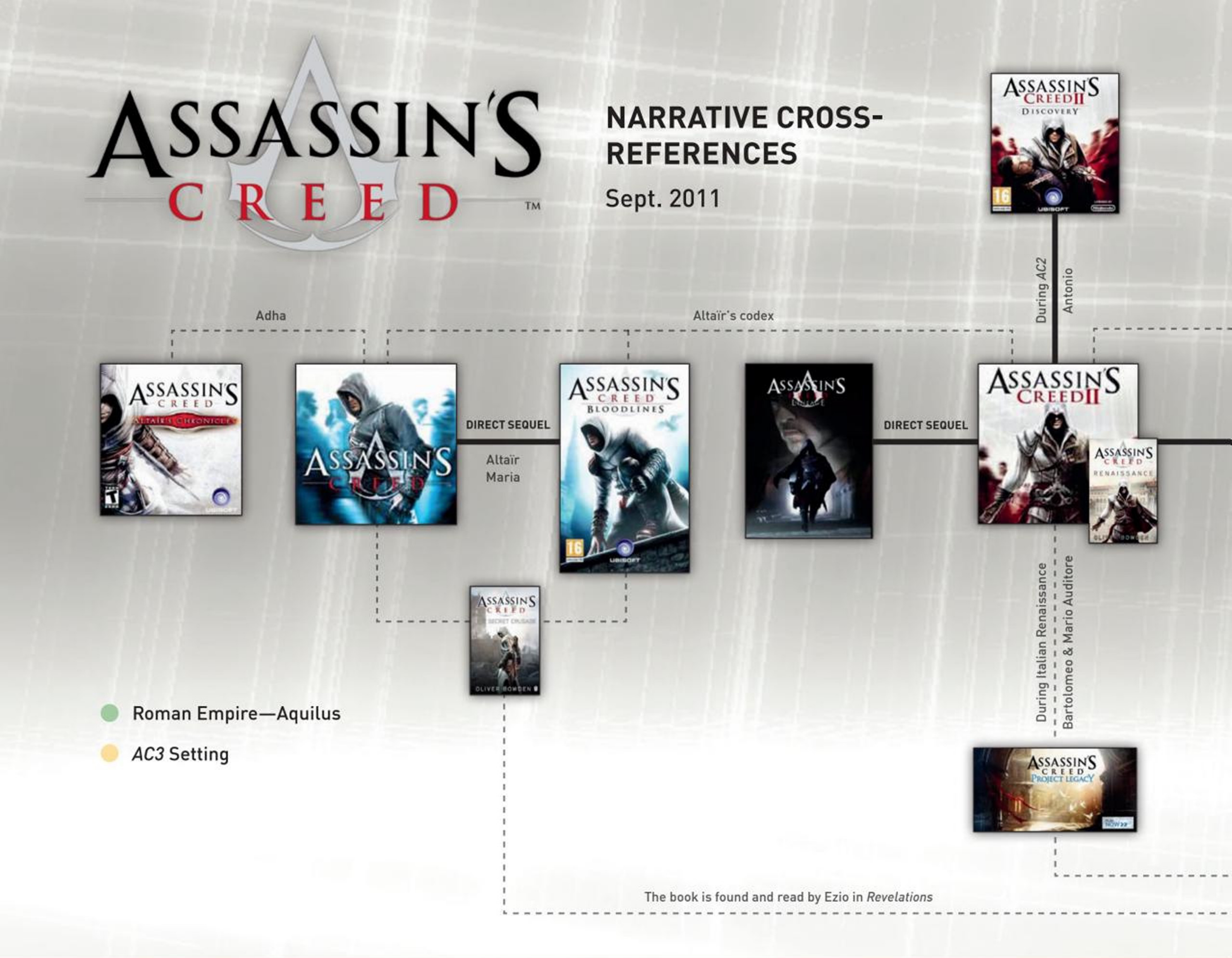

BEYOND THE GAMES

During the Ezio Trilogy, Ubisoft wanted to capitalize on the success of the *Assassin's Creed* brand to expand its reach. This was partly done via transmedia, which saw comics, novels, and even films exploring the world of *Assassin's Creed* outside of the games.

"The strategy was to become a major entertainment franchise," Guesdon explains. "We wanted to be on par with the biggest entertainment brands out there, so we needed to develop all kinds of media. We had a very strong narrative pillar, which allowed us both to tell a lot of stories and to play with the entirety of human history. That meant there was a lot of potential."

In order to make this work, the Ubisoft team had to come up with guidelines to demonstrate how the mechanics of the *Assassin's Creed* universe worked in reality.

"One of the key bits of information that we had to give teams working on these projects was that the Animus is not a time machine," Guesdon says. "You cannot time travel. I made the visual schematics to explain how the genetic memories were transmitted from one generation to another and so on. It was very controlled."

One of the first transmedia projects developed was the comic book *The Fall*, starring Russian assassin Nikolai Orelov. Initially, this could have looked very different.

"We did a test with the authors, Cameron Stewart and Karl Kerschl," Guesdon remembers. "For that, they came back with a one-page document featuring Ezio.

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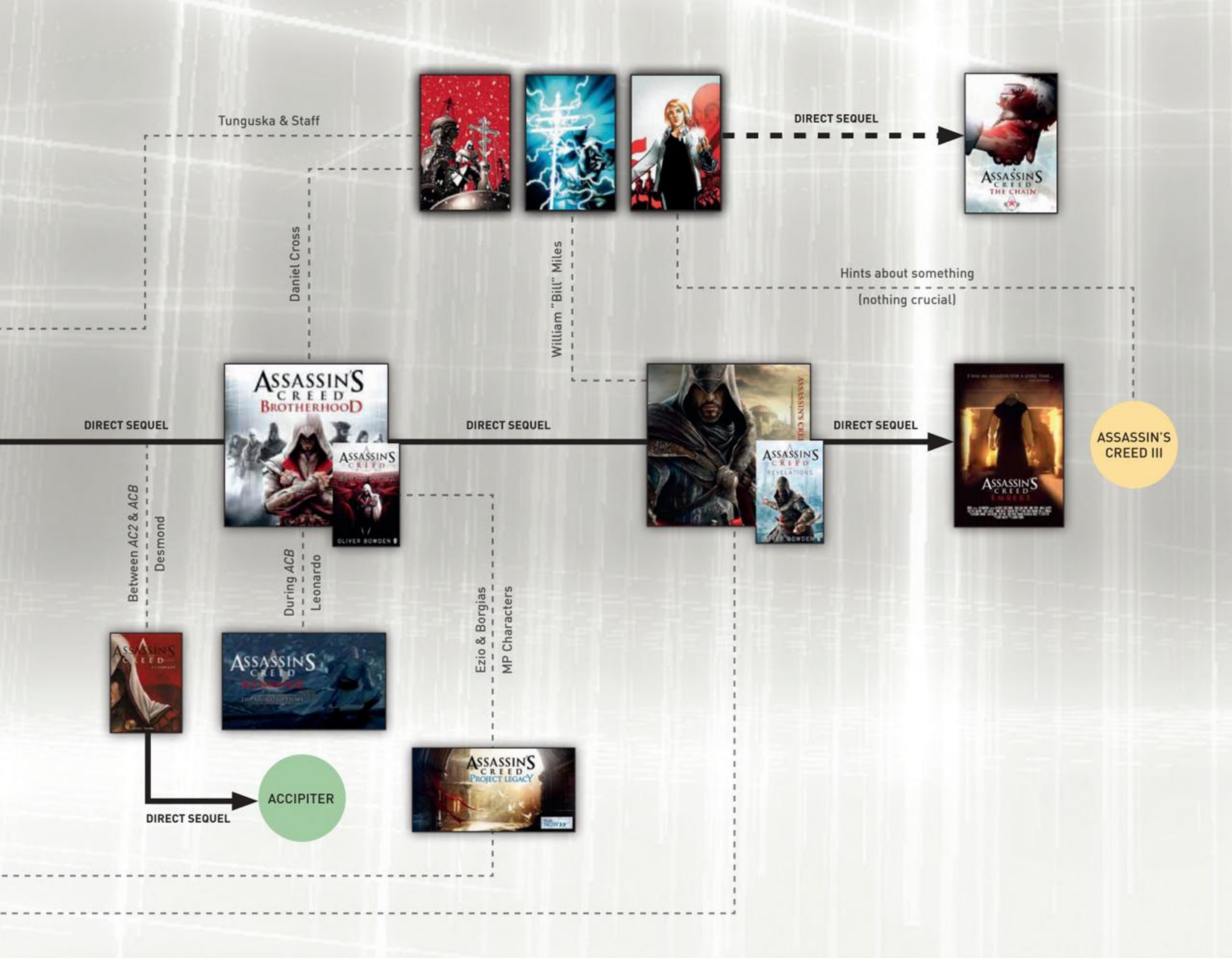

At the time, he was our biggest character. We loved what they had done, but we didn't want them to use Ezio, so we gave them the freedom to explore another time period and create their own character."

Quickly, the Ubisoft team realized the best way to approach transmedia projects. It wasn't about trying to sell more games—these products weren't meant to push sales—but rather it was about galvanizing the *Assassin's Creed* brand.

"It's intended to enrich our lore and universe, as well as to build brand awareness," Azaïzia explains. "Whether we're releasing a new comic book, novel, or movie, it has to be independent, and it has to be good in its own right—something that you would recommend to your friends, even if they don't know *Assassin's Creed*. Our job is to ensure it respects the franchise's core identity, DNA, or lore and that it will give you something more."

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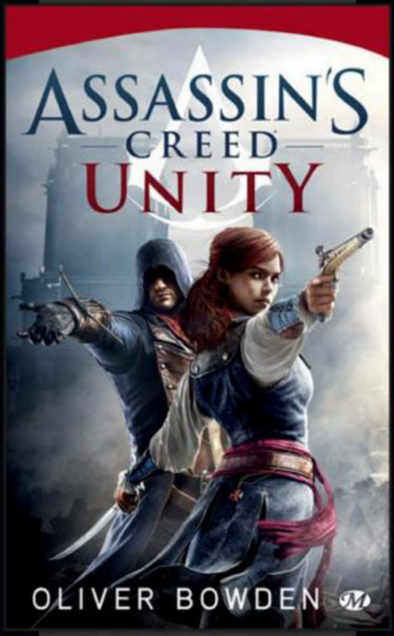
NOVELS

Following the success of the first game, Penguin Books approached Ubisoft, looking to collaborate. The result was *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance*, a novelization of *Assassin's Creed II* written by Oliver Bowden. This was followed by an adaptation of *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*, but with *Assassin's Creed: The Secret Crusade*, the novels began to tell new stories, in this case revealing more about the life of the series' first hero, Altaïr.

Whether direct adaptations of the game's events or tie-in stories, many novels have since been published by various publishing houses around the world.

ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY



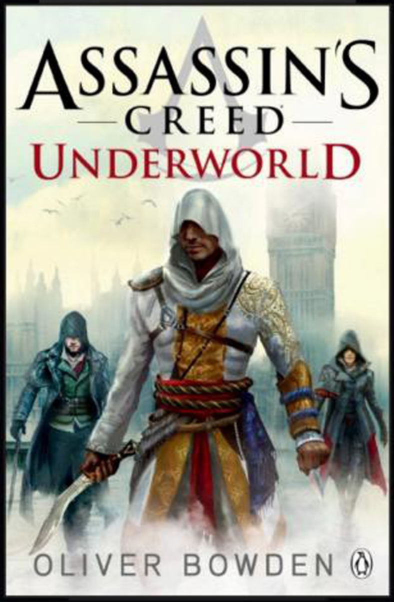
"I personally really enjoyed working on the *Assassin's Creed: Unity* novel," Bachman says.

As with *Assassin's Creed: Forsaken*—the book that was released alongside *Assassin's Creed III*—Ubisoft decided to tell the story from a different perspective: one that would build upon the in-game narrative.

"We wrote from the point of view of Arno's partner, Élise, who is also a Templar," Bachman adds. "That was really cool, and I found it important to acknowledge her as a character because a lot of people were saying that they wished they could have played her as well as Arno. Her story in the novel was a good opportunity to really build on her character. We worked hand in hand with the writers to make sure that her story was fully fleshed out with what you see in the game and what had been intended.

"It wasn't like we brought in an author to make up her backstory. Everything was connected; it was how the narrative directors and writers felt that her background would have been."

ASSASSIN'S CREED UNDERWORLD



With *Syndicate*, the transmedia team decided to be even more ambitious, telling the story of a character from the game with a plot that is only narrowly related to the main narrative.

"You are already playing as Evie and Jacob in *Syndicate*," Bachman says. "We wanted to tell the players more about them, but not to retell the game's story in a book. We decided to tell a prologue story instead.

"We had this amazing character in Jayadeep and thought it would be interesting to explore how he ended up in the story of *Syndicate*," Bachman explains. "There are only a few hints in the game. He's such a magnificent character. His outfit and weapon are both stunning. His weapon is astonishing.

"It only took about half an hour of discussion to decide that his story was the one we needed to tell, and that part of the story would be set in India. It took a lot of research, but it was really worth it."

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YOUNG ADULT NOVELS

LAST DESCENDANTS

Assassin's Creed has also inspired original novels, starting with 2016's *Last Descendants*, the first in a young adult series published in partnership with Scholastic, which wanted to bring *Assassin's Creed*'s ability to educate and entertain to a younger audience.

Penned by award-winning author Matthew J. Kirby, the first book of Last Descendants revolves around a group of teenagers who use the Animus to relive genetic memories of the 1863 draft riots in New York City and consequently find themselves caught up in the ancient war between Templars and Assassins.

Kirby presented a number of characters and settings to Ubisoft, eventually landing on a contemporary teenage protagonist named Owen Meyers who was exploring the riots.

That all sounds rather heavy for a book nominally aimed at teenagers, but Kirby's experience as a teacher and psychologist was helpful in this regard.

"The *Last Descendants* series doesn't shy away from really tough subjects and violence," Bachman explains. "You can't viscerally describe a violent death, but you can tackle things like racism and disability.

"That's also why it took a while for the franchise to dig into YA—because the very premise of *Assassin's Creed*'s gameplay involves stabbing people with a huge blade attached to your arm. By the time we started *Last Descendants*, the franchise and its lore had developed enough that we had a wealth of things to base a book on that weren't just gameplay."

ASSASSIN'S CREED FRAGMENTS

In 2021, Ubisoft released a second young adult book series called *Assassin's Creed Fragments* with the French partner 404 Éditions. This time, the books feature teen protagonists living during different periods of history, featuring new characters for each novel but with the common theme of exploring the nature of the relationship between siblings.

"Each book in *Assassin's Creed Fragments* is written by a different author. *Fragments* is a trilogy where each author had the liberty to pick a different time period. It's really unique for a trilogy, and we got to explore Japan for the first time with the first book, so that was pretty exciting!" explains Fatiha Chellali, transmedia project manager at Ubisoft.

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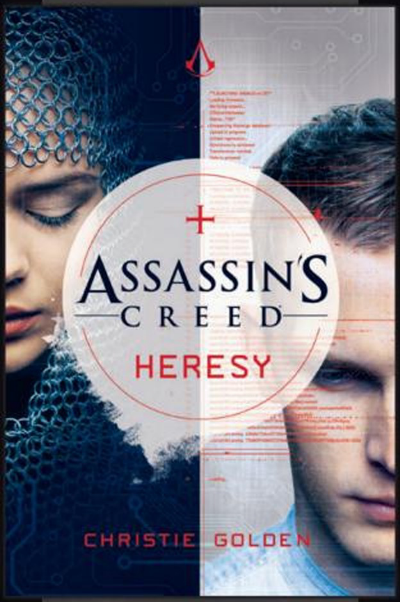
ASSASSIN'S CREED HERESY



Transmedia storytelling is often a way for Ubisoft to explore historical settings, figures, and ideas that hadn't yet been encountered within the *Assassin's Creed* games. When they brought in author Christie Golden—known for her work creating books for Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft*—one character stood out to her.

"We had this whiteboard to plan *Assassin's Creed Heresy* where we wrote down everything we had in mind," Bachman explains. "Joan of Arc was one of them. Christie loved the idea of working with Joan of Arc, who was this incredibly complex character. We discussed multiple settings, multiple characters, and this one really stood out to her."

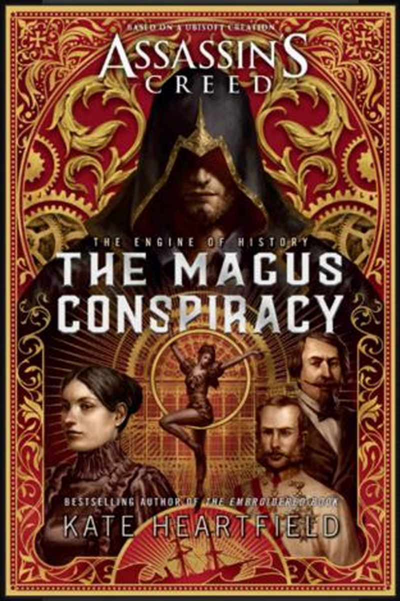
Golden also created *Heresy*'s present-day framing, including the character of the Templar Simon Hathaway, which allowed the story to have more complexity.

"Christie had some really cool character development, as well as some really tight switching between modern day and the past, because there's a lot of moving back and forth that you can do in a novel that you can't do in a game. Otherwise, you'll completely break immersion," Bachman adds.

The novel format allowed for a deeper examination of the Templar ideology than what had previously been possible.

"Novels allow you to really dive into the inner thoughts and psyche of someone," Bachman says. "It's easier to show this kind of nuanced psychology and gray zones."

THE MAGUS CONSPIRACY



The Magus Conspiracy is the latest original novel developed in a partnership between Ubisoft and Aconyte Books. The book is set at the turn of the nineteenth century as European kingdoms and empires fall under the tide of modernity, and it features characters like the brilliant mathematician Ada Lovelace.

"I have a background in political science, and I was really interested in exploring the philosophical underpinnings of the Brotherhood and imagining what these would be in the late nineteenth century, and what the Assassins and the Templars might have looked like across Europe at that time. The book is set in 1851 and takes place in several different countries where there wasn't necessarily a lot of lore already created about who was there and what they were doing," explains author Kate Heartfield.

"Kate delivered a wonderful and captivating story with this book. I loved to follow our two heroes—Pierrette and Simeon—on their adventure and how they evolved throughout. I think it's also the first time in a novel where we travel to so many different places in Europe," adds Fatiha Chellali.

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COMICS

ASSASSINS AND TEMPLARS COMICS

In 2015, Ubisoft revealed a partnership with comics specialist Titan to run two concurrent series of graphic novels based on the *Assassin's Creed* IP. These were focused on the Assassins and Templars, respectively. With the former, Ubisoft tried to satiate the demand for content that wasn't being fulfilled by the games at that point in time.

"With the *Assassins* series, we went into the modern day, which had taken a little bit of a back seat in the games," Bachman admits.

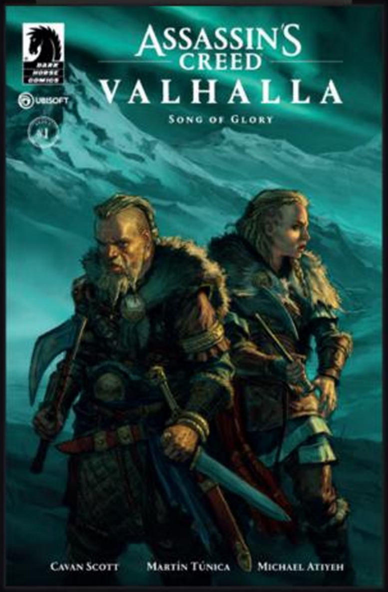
The team worked with writers Conor McCreery and Anthony Del Col—as well as artists Neil Edwards and Vittorio Garofoli and colorist Ivan Nunes—to figure out what this world was going to be.

"We gave them a sandbox to work with, and they came back to us with proposals for this character, Charlotte de la Cruz," Bachman explains. "We wanted to have a female character, as well as a diverse representation in that cast and of the present."

The *Templars* comic, meanwhile, starred Albert "Albie" Bolden, who used the alias the Black Cross, and later Juhani Otso Berg. Once again this gave Ubisoft an opportunity to explore the Templar philosophy after initially doing so in 2014's *Rogue*.

"I wouldn't say the *Templars* comic was inspired by *Rogue*, but oh my god, telling the Templar story is so cool," Bachman laughs.

"A lot of their initial philosophy is not necessarily rooted in evil or in trying to oppress people. There's something to be said about the morals and values of true Templars. We wanted to tell these stories about Templars who are not evil, but rather are complex human beings who have good sides and bad sides. We also wanted to include stories of the Templars who discover how dark things can get if you go too far."



ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA SONG OF GLORY

In 2019, Ubisoft partnered with Dark Horse Comics to develop the comic prequel for *Assassin's Creed Valhalla.*

"When Dark Horse told us Cavan Scott would be available to write this story, we thought he was the perfect choice. Cavan is a huge fan of the Viking Age. The comic takes place about a year before the events of *Valhalla* and does a great job of introducing Eivor. You can see how she's learned to balance her personal ambition against the safety of her clan through this adventure," comments Azaïzia. "Because the game is the benchmark Viking experience, our intention for this book was to deliver a Viking experience through the lens of the comic medium, and I think Cavan and artist Martín Túnica definitely delivered on that front!"

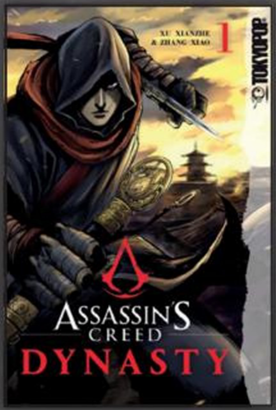
Auteursrechtelijk beschermd materiaal

MANHUA, MANGA, AND WEBTOONS

Some of the newest transmedia creations come from collaborations with talented Asian authors and artists, notably in China, Japan, and Korea, with several comics currently in development.

By bringing talents from all over the world to craft new transmedia narratives, Ubisoft aims to enrich the *Assassin's Creed* universe with authentic stories that resonate with local fans. "We seek to offer our fans new content in formats they are familiar with and with stories that are rooted in their cultural background and their history," adds Etienne Bouvier, publishing content manager at Ubisoft.

ASSASSIN'S CREED DYNASTY



Created by Xu Xianzhe and illustrated by Zhang Xiao, *Assassin's Creed Dynasty* is Ubisoft's first Chinese manhua. It features an all-new character and story and is set in eighth-century China. First launched as a webcomic in China by the local development partner ULAB, the manhua had garnered more than two billion views on digital platforms as of October 2022.

"We've wanted to create a full-fledged *Assassin's Creed* story set in China for a long time, but we also wanted to do it right," says Bouvier. "We took the time to find the proper creative team and the best story. Working with Xu Xianzhe and Zhang Xiao on that project has been one of the best experiences we ever had."

ASSASSIN'S CREED BLADE OF SHAO JUN

A manga set in the *Assassin's Creed* universe, *Assassin's Creed Blade of Shao Jun* tells the story of the efforts of an Assassin to rebuild the Brotherhood in China. A character initially introduced in the short film *Assassin's Creed: Embers*, Shao Jun then took center stage in the video game *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China* before having her own manga, novel series, and audio drama.

ASSASSIN'S CREED FORGOTTEN TEMPLE

Produced by Redice Studio, a leading webtoon studio in South Korea, this comic will serve as a sequel to *Assassin's Creed Black Flag* and continue Edward Kenway's story. "We are very enthusiastic about this project. It's great to bring Edward back; we feel existing fans will be excited to see a new adventure of our favorite pirate assassin. And for us, the webtoon format is also a way to bring *Assassin's Creed* to newcomers as well," says Azaïzia.

"Webtoons are an incredible format to tell deep, engaging story with a very innovative narrative flow, and a worldwide reach. We are very enthusiastic about this project and we hope it will allow newcomers to discover our universe through this media," adds Bouvier.

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AUDIO

ASSASSIN'S CREED GOLD

In this first-ever *Assassin's Creed* audio series, listeners discover Aliyah Kahn, a card shark and small-time con woman living in London. She is recruited by the Brotherhood to delve into her ancestor's past and decode a mysterious inscription on a gold coin from the year 1696—a time during which Isaac Newton was tasked with running the Royal Mint and with stamping out counterfeiting.

"The twist is that Aliyah's ancestor, Assassin Omar Khaled, is blind," explains Bachman. "Anthony Del Col, with whom we had already worked on an *Assassin's Creed* comic series, really thought this would enhance the experience for the listener. And indeed, the audio feels like a totally immersive experience. I don't think this story would translate that well into another medium."

Thanks to production partner Audible, the audio series was also a breakthrough in terms of casting, with world-famous actors such as Riz Ahmed (*Venom*, *Sound of Metal*) and Anthony Head (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) lending their voices to the story.

ASSASSIN'S CREED SYMPHONIC ADVENTURE

Since its creation, *Assassin's Creed* has given players some unforgettable gameplay experiences, and its music has been pivotal in that achievement. For each game, Ubisoft's music supervisors work with respected composers to help define what the score should convey to the player. Jesper Kyd, Lorne Balfe, Sarah Schachner, and Einar Selvik are among the acclaimed musicians that produced the franchise's iconic music over the years.

In 2022, to celebrate the music of *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft partnered with Overlook Events to produce an immersive concert series: Assassin's Creed Symphonic Adventure. The concert—a two-hour performance with a full symphonic orchestra, also featuring a choir and soloists—revisits the depths of the franchise's music from the beginning of the ages to the modern sonorities of the Animus.

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THE ASSASSIN'S CREED MOVIE

Bringing the *Assassin's Creed* brand to the silver screen just made sense, given that Ubisoft had already explored other transmedia including comics, novelizations, and even short films.

The company set up Ubisoft Film & Television in Los Angeles to work on an *Assassin's Creed* film with the aim of finding all the right talent for such a project. Ultimately, the game firm signed with New Regency and 20th Century Fox to create the movie. Shortly after, Michael Fassbender was cast to play the lead. Though he hadn't played the *Assassin's Creed* games, the film's star showed up with extensive knowledge of the franchise.

"When we had the first script reading, he'd read all of the lore books we had sent him," Azaïzia says. "He learned it like it was a bible. He knew everything about *Assassin's Creed* and had a really good comprehension of the universe. That was pretty flattering.

"A lot of people tend to think that in order to understand the characters and the universe, you have to play a lot of the games. You can learn the lore by watching videos and reading books—that's just as valuable. Michael's job is to act, not to play games. If he understands the character we want to build; if he's coming with credibility, physicality; and if he knows the universe, like, I'm good."

The *Assassin's Creed* movie features a modern-day character, Callum Lynch, who is reliving the memories of Aguilar de Nerha, an Assassin based in fifteenth-century Spain during the Inquisition. This setting was chosen, in part, due to it being reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance setting of the Ezio Trilogy. In fact, Ezio was set to make an appearance, but the team was unable to make it fit within the film's reality.

"Ezio was supposed to appear in the auto-da-fé sequence," Azaïzia says. "Aguilar and Maria were to be executed in front of the grand inquisitor and the royal family of Spain, but they ultimately escaped. At one point, the person that was supposed to help them was Ezio.

"But then we faced a few issues. One was that it was really hard to find someone who resembled Ezio. We would have had to find a look-alike that would also be credible so people would recognize him in the tone, in the voice, in the physicality. It was also hard to figure out how Ezio would arrive. We had scripts where he was piloting the flying machine, another where he came in thanks to a parachute from da Vinci. Most of the time it felt like this huge deus ex machina that made no sense.

"If you have a cameo, it has to work. It has to be elegant. Ezio has to look good, and I want his role to have a purpose."

One focus of the film was a sense of tangibility. The team worked with weapons specialist Tim Wildgoose to give items such as hidden blades more personality than they might otherwise have had.

"All of the pieces worked, like in a James Bond movie," Azaïzia says. "Tim used the hidden blade the way it was meant to be used, which meant like a lightsaber. Every single little hidden blade is supposed to be a reflection of the character that holds it, and every one of them is unique. If you look at Callum's father's hidden blade, it looks like Rambo's knife. Callum's has a really intricate design, but Maria's is thinner and more refined, and she has two instead of one."

The next chapter of *Assassin's Creed* onscreen will be a brand-new, live-action *Assassin's Creed* series, which will be coming to Netflix.

"With the TV series, we already have at least one season—and options for multiple seasons—to be able to tell stories," Azaïzia says. "When you have ten or twelve hours to tell a story, you can approach the writing in a very different way. I think that it's a more appropriate way to deliver that universe. It's going to be something different."

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MERCHANDISE

"Merchandising is an essential part of a brand. It's an extension that physically materializes the franchise's fantasy. It gives an audience the ability to engage even more with a universe they've fallen in love with," says Aymar Azaïzia.

Assassin's Creed was created by a team of passionate and ambitious visionaries who, in doing so, provided a set of iconic elements: a beaked hood and a white suit with a red sash, the eagle silhouette, the avian crest insignia, and—of course—the leap of faith.

All these assets were key in establishing the franchise's DNA and finding partners to turn those concepts into real objects—from realistic figurines to modern apparel to replicas of hidden blades . . . Thanks to dedicated fans and collectors, Ubisoft has been able to evolve beyond their wildest ambitions and keeps pushing the bar in terms of quality, originality, and variety of projects they are able to offer.

Assassin's Creed collectible toys, figures, and statues are crafted by some of the most talented toy makers in the world. Each product captures the essence of the many heroes and heroines that the *Assassin's Creed* franchise has crafted and brings them into the physical world through each manufacturer's creative vision.

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DESMOND HOODIE

Originally released in 2012 by Ubi Workshop, the in-house transmedia and merchandising arm of Ubisoft at the time, the Desmond Hoodie rapidly became a fan-favorite piece of merchandise.

"We worked directly with the developers to design a premium piece of apparel: a replica of the hoodie Desmond wore in *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*," remembers graphic designer Julia Hedrich. "The hoodie bears no *Assassin's Creed* logo, unlike most licensed merchandise. Only fans would recognize the hoodie as Desmond Miles's."

The team put careful effort into making sure that the replica would match the in-game garment. "I had to check that the color and stitching of the manufacturer sample exactly matched the way the hoodie appeared in the game. We had to go through several rounds of samples to make it right.

"The hoodie was so well received by the community that we ended up making new versions of it and took a similar approach to design other main Assassins' hoodies."

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INTERVIEWEES

MARC-ALEXIS CÔTÉ—executive producer at Ubisoft Québec

JADE RAYMOND—former *Assassin's Creed* producer, now founder of Haven Studios

PHILIPPE BERGERON—former *Assassin's Creed* level design director, now level design director at Gearbox Studio Montréal

SÉBASTIEN PUEL—former senior executive producer at Ubisoft Montréal

CLAUDE LANGLAIS—technical director at Ubisoft Montréal

FLORENCE BACCARD—product director at Ubisoft Montréal

RAPHAËL LACOSTE—former *Assassin's Creed* franchise art director, now art director at Haven Studios

MICHAEL BEADLE—senior director of public relations at Ubisoft San Francisco

JEAN GUESDON—creative director at Ubisoft Montréal

JEFFREY YOHALEM—writer and narrative director at Ubisoft Québec

KARL LUHE—producer at Ubisoft Annecy

AYMAR AZAÏZIA—transmedia and business development director at Ubisoft Montréal

MATHIEU GRANJON—art and realization director at Ubisoft Annecy

JULIEN LAFERRIÈRE—senior producer at Ubisoft Montréal

GABRIEL GRAZIANI—former community development manager at Ubisoft Montréal, now senior lead of global community at EA Games

DARBY MCDEVITT—narrative director at Ubisoft Montréal

ROGER CRAIG SMITH—actor

MAXIME DURAND—historian and world design director at Ubisoft Montréal

SIMON LANDRY—music supervisor at Ubisoft Montréal

ETIENNE ALLONIER—brand director at Ubisoft Montréal

ALEX HUTCHINSON—former creative director on *Assassin's Creed III*, now cofounder of Raccoon Logic

MIKHAIL LOZANOV—creative director at Ubisoft Sofia

TRAVIS STOUT—narrative designer at Ubisoft Massive

THIERRY DANSEREAU—art director at Ubisoft Québec

JONATHAN DUMONT—narrative director at Ubisoft Québec

CECILIE STENSPIL—actor

MAGNUS BRUUN—actor

ANOUK BACHMAN—former brand content manager at Ubisoft Montréal, now producer at Compulsion Games

STÉPHANE BOUDON—creative director at Ubisoft Bordeaux

SARAH BEAULIEU—narrative director at Ubisoft Bordeaux

FATIHA CHELLALI—transmedia publishing project manager

KATE HEARTFIELD—author, *The Magus Conspiracy*

ETIENNE BOUVIER—senior transmedia content manager

JULIA HEDRICH—graphic designer

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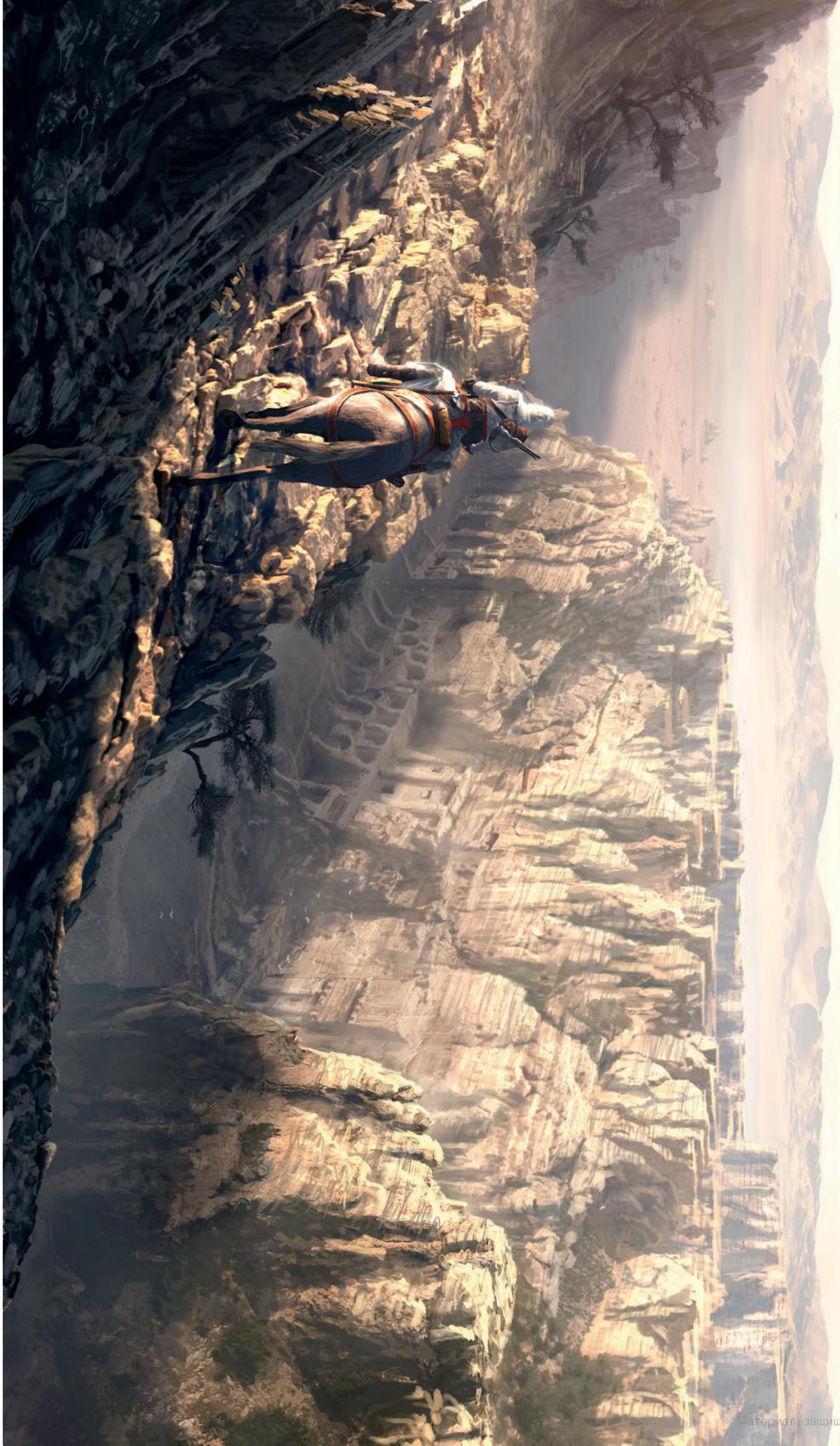

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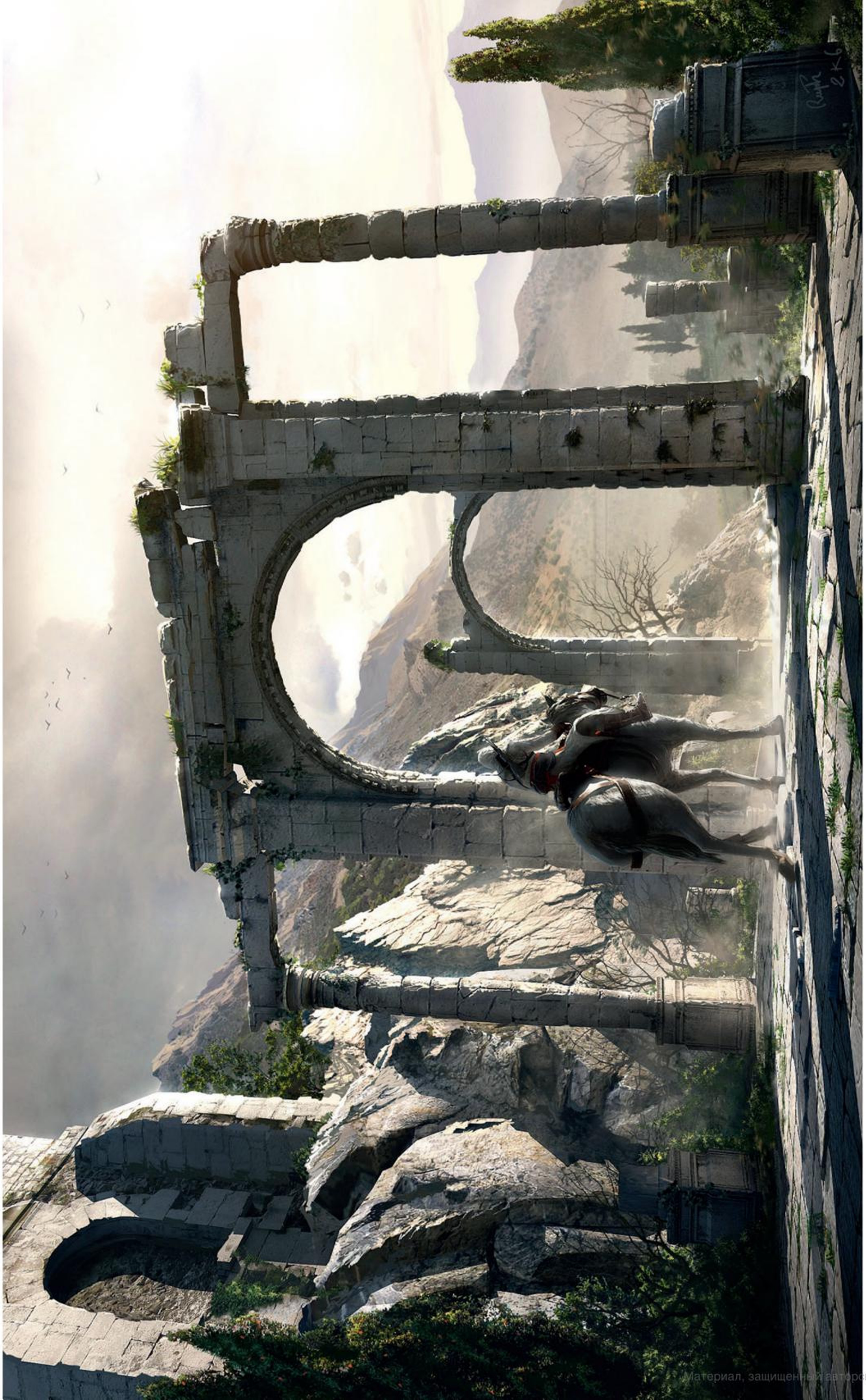

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THE MAKING OF

ASSASSIN'S CREED®

15TH ANNIVERSARY

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- Explore each *Assassin's Creed* through gorgeous concept and marketing art!
- Revisit iconic assassins, such as Ezio, Edward Kenway, Altaïr, and many more!

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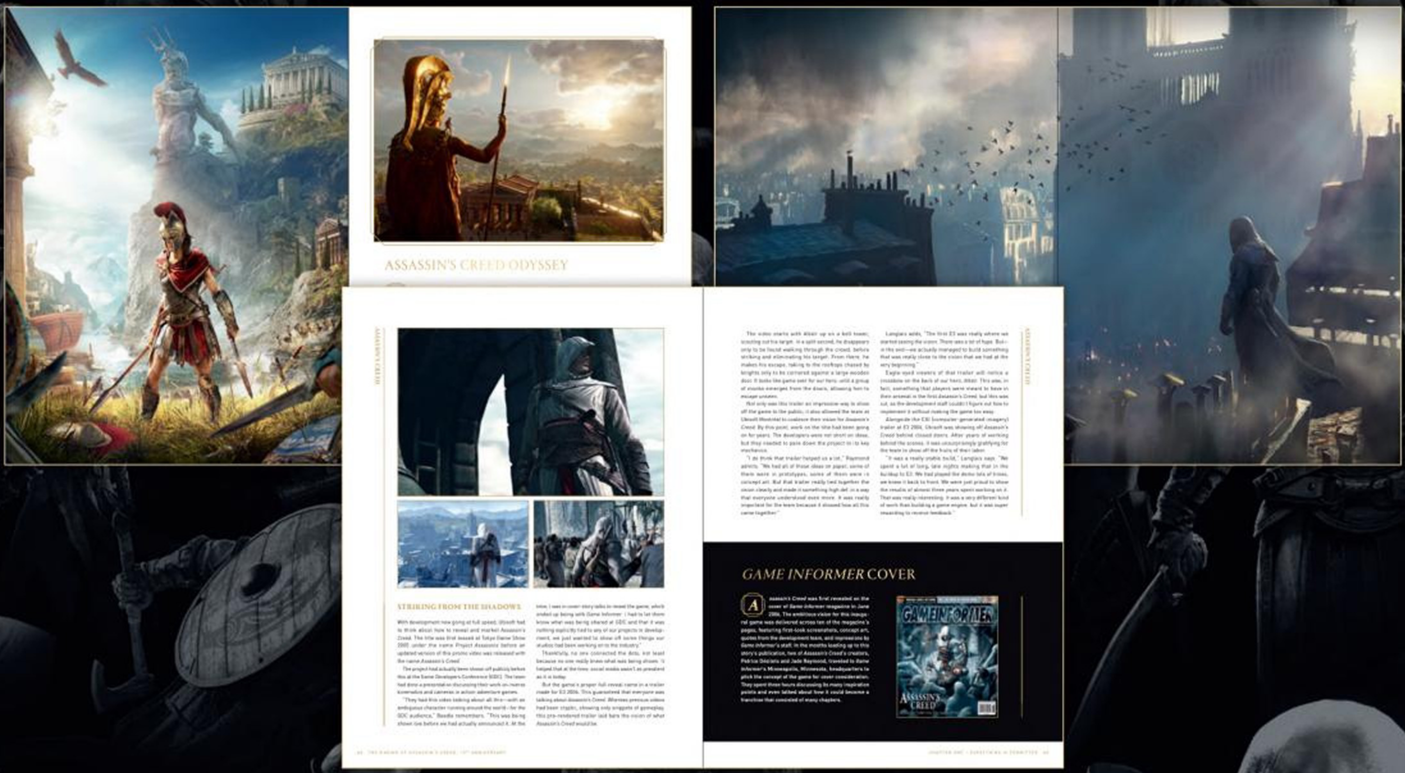

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THE MAKING OF

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